Prevalence, Trends and Characteristics of Skipped-Generation Households

Rachel Dunifon and Natasha Pilkauskas
Cornell University

In 2012, approximately 2.9% of U.S. children lived in a skipped-generation household, or a household consisting of a grandparent and grandchild but no parent (also known as custodial grandparent households or grandparent kinship care). The percent of children in skipped-generation households is nearly as high as that of children who live in cohabiting families (3.9%, Vespa, Lewis & Kreider, 2013), yet much less is known about skipped-generation families. Additionally, there is reason to believe that children in skipped-generation families have unique needs, including high rates of poverty, low levels of service receipt, contact with the child welfare system, and a high prevalence of health problems (Dunifon, Ziol-Guest and Kopko, 2014). However, little is known about the prevalence, trends and characteristics of children in skipped-generation households. The goal of this paper is to fill that gap, increasing our understanding of a unique family type and, in doing so, highlight potential areas for policy and practice interventions.

Specifically, we ask the following questions:
- What is the prevalence of children living in skipped-generation households from 2000 -2012? How and why do those estimates differ across large national datasets?
- What are the characteristics of children living in skipped-generation households? We examine demographic characteristics, household compositional complexity, public program participation, and health/disability.
- Has the profile of skipped-generation households changed over the last decade?
- What geographical variation exists in the prevalence and characteristics of skipped-generation households?

In addressing these questions, we shed light on the existing literature in several ways. First, we focus specifically on children in skipped-generation households. Recent reports using Census data to document the prevalence of children living with grandparents have conflated two very different groups of children – those living in three-generation households (with a parent and grandparent) and those in skipped-generation families (e.g. Pew Research Center, 2013; National Center for Family and Marriage Research, 2014). Yet the formation, needs, and characteristics of children in three-generation households differ greatly from those in skipped-generation households (Dunifon, Ziol-Guest and Kopko, 2014), highlighting the importance of studying skipped-generation households separately.

Second, we use two large nationally representative data sets, the American Community Survey (ACS) and the Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP), to study the prevalence and characteristics of skipped-generation households, taking advantage of the relative strengths of each dataset and comparing estimates across datasets. Prior research has used the SIPP to document the prevalence (and differences by race/ethnicity) of skipped-generation households from 1991-2009 (Kreider & Ellis, 2011), but these estimates are periodic, whereas the ACS can provide us with annual, and more recent, estimates, albeit only since 2000 (Pebly & Rudkin [1999] also document the trends for 1989-1995 using the Current Population Survey).

Third, no research has studied whether the characteristics of skipped-generation households have changed over time. Although some studies have looked at the

characteristics of these households in general, most rely on small qualitative samples and the few studies that have used large data sets generally focus on the characteristics and wellbeing of the grandparents (e.g. Chase-Goodman & Silverstein, 2006) and on particular subgroups, such as African-American's or Central American grandparents (Minkler & Fuller-Thomson, 2005; Fuller-Thomson & Minkler, 2007), rather than children. We focus on describing children's living arrangements and take advantage of the rich set of demographic and socio-economic characteristics available in the two data sets to provide a fuller descriptive picture of skipped-generation households and how the profile of such families has changed over the past decade.

Last, we study geographical variation in the prevalence and characteristics of skipped-generation households. One earlier study investigated differences in the characteristics of skipped-generation households between the "Deep South" (Georgia, Alabama and Mississippi) and New England in 2000 and found that the type and tenure of skipped-generation households varied greatly between these two regions (Mutchler & Baker, 2004). We extend this earlier research to consider more geographical variation using the most recent data.

Data

We address these questions using the American Community Survey and the Survey of Income and Program Participation. We use the 2000-2012 waves of the ACS, an annual survey of approximately 1.9 million households or about 1% US households. We use data from the integrated Public Use Microdata Sample to conduct our analyses.

We use the 1996, 2001, 2004 and 2008 panels of the SIPP. The SIPP is representative of the national non-institutionalized population. Households in each panel are interviewed every 4 months (a wave) to gather information about the previous 4 months over a period of two to four years (the length of each panel varies). The size of the sample in each panel also varies between 20,000 and 40,000 households. We focus on wave 2 (topical module 2) from each panel – when the full detailed household roster is collected in each panel.

By using these two data sets we can exploit the relative advantages of each. The ACS provides us with annual estimates of the prevalence of skipped-generation households, but the household indicators (described more below) are somewhat limited. In comparison, the SIPP provides more detailed information on household relationships, but can only provide estimates every few years. The ACS sample is also large enough to provide the ability to study geographical variation, and it also contains information on the length of coresidence. Both datasets provide rich information on demographic characteristics of households, but the SIPP has data on health and detailed information on public assistance programs, a key area of concern when studying children in skipped-generation households. Prior research has shown that about 75% of children who live in a household without a parent present receive no TANF, SSI or foster child payments, despite the fact that virtually all such families are eligible for some kind of public assistance, and despite high rates of financial need (Bavier, 2011). By using the SIPP in conjunction with the ACS we can study patterns of program participation among skipped-generation households to better understand gaps in public policy.

Measures

Skipped-Generation Households

For the ACS, using information on the relationship to the head of the household and parent pointers developed by IPUMS, we identify skipped-generation households as those households where a grandparent is the head of the household and is living with a grandchild but no parents of the grandchild are present. We then calculate the percent of children in skipped-generation households by restricting to the population of children. Unfortunately, it is not possible to identify the relationships in the household without reference to the household head. This has two potential drawbacks. First, we are not able to identify children in skipped-generation households in which the grandparent is not the household head. Second, we may overestimate the percent of children living in skipped-generation households. Because of the data structure, it is difficult to differentiate children in a skipped-generation household from other children who may be coresident with a skipped-generation family but are not actually skipped-generation. As a next step we hope to see if we can find a way to differentiate these two groups. This does not affect the number of households identified as including a skipped-generation, but rather the percent of children identified as skipped-generation. In the future we plan to further test to what extent each of these problems are likely to arise in the ACS. Previous work using the ACS to document the prevalence of such households has not addressed the extent to which these measurement issues may influence estimates derived from the ACS.

The SIPP, unlike the ACS, includes a full household roster detailing the relationship of each member of the household to all other members. Using the roster and pointers that indicate the relationship of each person to the other, we can identify the number of children in a skipped-generation family.

Other Characteristics

We will study a number of characteristics of skipped-generation families. First, we will study basic demographic characteristics, including education, age (of the grandparent and grandchild), income/poverty, employment, race/ethnicity, gender of the grandchild and marital status of the grandparent generation. Second we will look at the length of skipped-generation coresidence and geographical variation in the prevalence of these households using the ACS. Third, we will study the complexity of these households, considering the household size, siblings, and other details such as coresidence with other relatives or nonrelatives, using data from the SIPP. Fourth we will consider the health and wellbeing of children and grandparents in skipped-generation households using data from the SIPP. Last, we will study program participation among these households, such as Temporary Aid to Needy Families, Supplemental Security Income, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, and foster child payments.

Preliminary Results

Figure 1 plots the percent of children in skipped-generation households by year in the ACS and when available, from the SIPP. The figures from the ACS suggest that the percent of children living in a skipped-generation household has been relatively steady over the last decade. In comparison, the data from SIPP suggest there has been a slight increase in the percent of skipped-generation households over time, but the estimates are slightly lower

overall than the ACS estimates. In the future, we plan to investigate what drives the differences in these estimates. While both the SIPP and ACS have been used to document the prevalence of skipped-generation households, no previous study has used both datasets and attempted to account for the differences in prevalence across them. Doing so is a key goal of this study and will move research in this area forward by clarifying the pros and cons of these various datasets and providing clarity on the most accurate way to measure the prevalence of skipped-generation households.

Figure 1: Skipped-Generation Households Over Time - ACS & SIPP
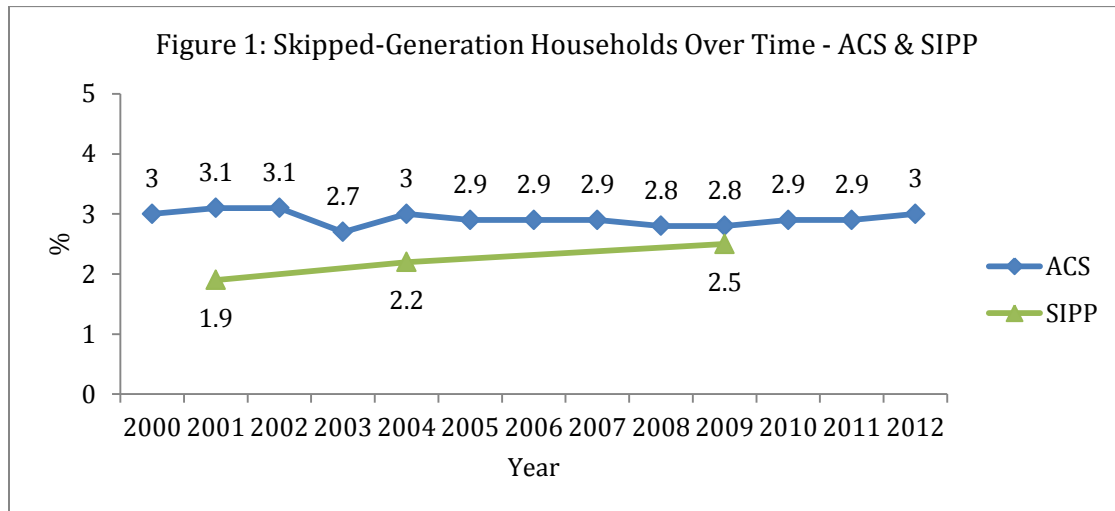
Note: Figures for SIPP come from Kreider & Ellis, 2011.

The ACS also provides data on the length of coresidence in skipped-generation households, plotted in Figure 2 for 2012. We find that half of children in skipped-generation households have lived in these households for more than 5 years, 15% for 3-4 years and 19% for 1-2 years, suggesting coresidence is relatively long-lived.

Figure 2: Length of skipped-generation coresidence, 2012
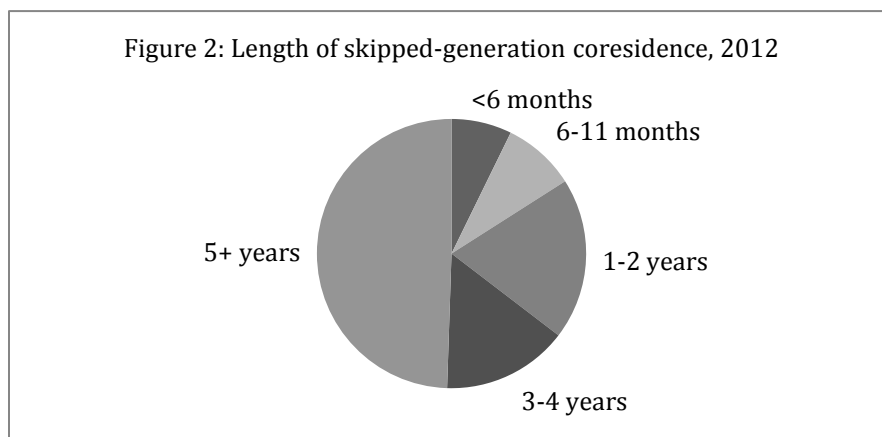
Our next steps include studying the demographic characteristics, geographic variation, household complexity, health and government program participation of skipped-generation households and whether these characteristics change over time. Additionally, we plan to better understand and document the differences between the ACS and SIPP for studying these households. Doing so not is not only essential for moving research on such families forward but also provides key information for programs and policies designed to improve their well-being.