

## Multigenerational Households

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*The ache for home lives in all of us, the safe place where we can go as we are and not be questioned.” – Maya Angelou*

This fact sheet provides information about the growing prevalence of multigenerational households, the reasons for their formation, the rewards and challenges household members face, and tips for making multigenerational households work for all family members.

### What Are Multigenerational Households?

The term “multigenerational household” is defined in different ways. The U.S. Census Bureau defines a multigenerational household as a living arrangement in which three or more generations share a housing unit, with one person – the “householder” – owning, buying, or renting the unit.<sup>1</sup> For example, a householder, child of the householder (biological, stepchild, or adopted child), and grandchildren of the householder may live together. Another arrangement might be a householder living with a parent and his or her own child. More expansive definitions of multigenerational households include a householder and his or her parent, or a householder and his or her adult child.<sup>2</sup> An additional type of multigenerational household includes a grandparent raising grandchildren without the parent present, or a “skipped generation family.”<sup>3</sup>

### Multigenerational Households Have Rapidly Increased

By the broadest definition today, more than 51 million Americans of all ages – or about one in six – live in multigenerational households, a more than 10 percent increase since the start of the Great Recession in 2007.<sup>4</sup> Other definitions show even greater increases: as high as 14.5 percent.<sup>5</sup> Regardless of how multigenerational households are defined, the recession clearly triggered a dramatic rise in the prevalence of multigenerational households, families whose motivation for coming together is often to consolidate resources and avoid poverty.



### Reasons for Multigenerational Households

In mid-19th-century America, aged adults living with their children was almost universal. However, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, this type of multigenerational family structure declined with the advent of Social Security and lessening importance of agricultural and occupational inheritance.<sup>6</sup>

Why are we now seeing a resurgence of multigenerational households?

**Economic:** A survey of adults commissioned by Generations United in 2011 found more than 66 percent of respondents reported economic conditions as a motivation to live in multigenerational households. The effects of the recent economic crisis and continuing uncertainty are reasons for families to “double (or even triple) up.” Unemployment and housing foreclosures constitute other reasons. In addition, many older adults outlive their retirement savings, needing the support of their children, who are parents themselves and already struggling to meet their families’ basic needs. They can more easily meet these economic challenges when all family members occupy the same household.

Another significant factor in the rise of multigenerational households is the number of young adults who move back in with their parents and extended families after having lived on their own. Many young adults cannot find jobs, lose their jobs, or are under-employed. A Pew Research Center survey found nearly 40 percent of young adults between the ages of 18 and 29 were out of the workforce in 2010, representing the highest level of young adult unemployment in nearly 40 years.<sup>7</sup>

**Situational:** Families often face great hardship when one or both spouses are deployed to serve in the military. Their parents and other relatives step in to offer housing and other support during these difficult times. Divorce is another situation during which family members come together for stability and economic security. Young parents may have demanding work schedules and find older relatives willing to move in to help take their children to school, engage them in activities, and help them with homework. More unmarried 20-somethings continue to live with their parents. Widows and widowers may be unable to live alone and feel isolated, desiring the companionship of their children and grandchildren. Relatives may suffer health and disability issues and need the support of their families to live rich and fulfilling lives.

**Cultural:** American Indians and Alaskan Natives celebrate young and older generations and consider living together quite natural. Latin Americans and Asians have immigrated to the U.S. in large numbers and are more likely to live in multigenerational families. African American families have a rich history of relying on each other to get through hard times.<sup>8</sup> In addition, many people deem it healthier to live in age-integrated communities where children and youth can benefit from the wisdom of elders. In turn, older adults get energized by interacting with young and feel more connected to the future.

## Multigenerational Housing Trends

From 2000 to 2010, Bloomberg reports a 30 percent increase in the multigenerational new home category.<sup>9</sup> Multigenerational families can buy new custom homes or remain in current homes by being practical, safe, and creative. Home renovations to accommodate the physical needs of all family members can include ramps for wheelchairs or strollers, and child-proofed rooms. Multigenerational families may move to

existing homes in age-integrated areas. Several new housing developments have studio apartments on the first floor with wider hallways and lower light switches for wheelchair accessibility. Some states and cities are rewriting zoning laws to allow for grandparent or mother-in-law apartments on the land of single family homes – an option that allows for greater flexibility as family structures change. In recent years, Generations United has consulted with real estate developers interested in building communities of the future. These developers see a decline in the interest in “sun cities”<sup>10</sup> and an increase in the appeal of intergenerational communities.



## Rewards

In their book, *Together Again*, Sharon Niederhaus and John Graham point out families have discovered living together has numerous rewards for all generations. Grandchildren obtain gifts of time, unconditional love, and attention from their grandparents. In turn, grandparents get emotional satisfaction from frequent interaction with their grandchildren and from the responsibilities of helping them. There is an emotional closeness that often forms with physical proximity.<sup>11</sup> According to the survey commissioned by Generations United, 82 percent of respondents agreed a multigenerational household arrangement has enhanced family bonds and relationships among family members.<sup>12</sup>

Other studies have shown that older adults who engage with children have numerous positive outcomes, including decreased depression, better health, and a renewed sense of purpose. In addition, children who live in multigenerational homes are less likely to fear aging or stereotype older adults.

## Tips for Making it Work

- Talk about and make decisions in advance when planning to live together including. Discuss what is expected of everyone with regard to household finances (who will buy groceries or pay the electric bill) and saving for the future.
- Discuss the length of stay. Make sure everyone has the same expectations about whether the arrangement will be temporary or permanent. Be prepared to renegotiate if the situation changes.
- Establish boundaries which respect privacy, individual needs, parenting, roles, and the hours people keep.
- Ensure open communication via regular family meetings or even family counseling.
- Allow all family members to have separate and shared spaces or identify family- together-times and alone times.
- Never make assumptions. Accept that people are individuals. Early birds and night owls are most likely not going to change their habits.
- Be sure everyone understands the agreements. Revisit and adjust them when needed.

## Challenges

Living in a multigenerational household can produce challenges. According to the 2011 Generations United's survey, 78 percent of respondents agreed the arrangement can cause stress between family members. It may take many months for some individuals to adjust to a restructured lifestyle while also finding a comfortable level of involvement in each other's lives. Elders may need time to adjust to a busier household. Members of the 'sandwich' generation may feel stress balancing the needs of their parents and children.<sup>13</sup> Children and youth need reassurance normalcy will emerge from a new family structure.

## Conclusion

Multigenerational households are on the rise in the United States. These arrangements pose both challenges and rewards. Yet at the core of this phenomenon is compassion. Multiple generations may live together because of the economic downturn, health and disability issues, situational changes, or the desire to maintain ethnic traditions. Whatever the reason, families unite to help each other maintain security, stability, and forge closer ties. Multigenerational families are leading the charge for all of us to value the interdependence of all generations.

## Resources

*Together Again*, by Sharon Niederhaus and John Graham, is a guide to successful multigenerational living. This book provides creative suggestions, including a resource section covering elder care,

family communication, and household aids, products, and organizations assisting older adults.

## Celebrating Multigenerational Family Bonds

Several times throughout the year, special commemorations honor multigenerational relationships.

- *National Grandparents Day* – This special day takes place each year on the Sunday after Labor Day. The purpose is to honor grandparents, to give grandparents an opportunity to show love for their children's children and help children become aware of the strength, wisdom, and guidance older people can offer. For more information about National Grandparents Day, visit [www.grandparentsday.com](http://www.grandparentsday.com).
- *National Family Caregivers Month* – November is recognized as National Family Caregivers Month. This is a time to honor, thank, support, assist, educate, and celebrate our nation's more than 50 million people who are family caregivers during the year. For more information, visit [www.nfcacares.org](http://www.nfcacares.org).
- *Intergeneration Day* – On the first Sunday in October, communities throughout the country are encouraged to participate in intergenerational activities to strengthen generational bonds. For more information, visit [www.intergenerationday.org](http://www.intergenerationday.org).

*Generations United is the only national membership organization focused solely on improving the lives of children, youth, and older people through intergenerational strategies, programs, and public policies. Since 1986, Generations United has served as a resource for educating policymakers and the public about the economic, social, and personal imperatives of intergenerational cooperation. Generations United acts as a catalyst for stimulating collaboration between aging, children, and youth organizations, providing a forum to explore areas of common ground while celebrating the richness of each generation.*

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<sup>1</sup>U.S. Census Bureau (2001), *Households and Families: 2000*, Census 2000 brief, Accessed on December 5, 2011 from <http://www.census.gov/prod/2001pubs/c2kbr01-8.pdf>

<sup>2</sup>The Pew Research Center defines adult children as age 25 years and older. Kochhar, Rakesh and Cohn, D'Vera (2011), "*Fighting Poverty in a Bad Economy, Americans Move in With Relatives.*" The Pew Research Center. Accessed December 5, 2011 from <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2011/10/03/fighting-poverty-in-a-bad-economy-americans-move-in-with-relatives/>

<sup>3</sup>Harrell, Rodney, PhD, Kassner, Enid, Figueiredo, PhD. Fact Sheet 221, April, 2011. "*Multigenerational Households Are Increasing.*" AARP Public Policy Institute (Washington, DC)

<sup>4</sup>Pew Research Center. "The Return of the Multigenerational Family Household." (March 2010.) Accessed on 28 November 2011 at <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/1528/multi-generational-family-household>.

<sup>5</sup>See note #3

<sup>6</sup>Ruggles, Steven (2003), "Multigenerational families in nineteenth century America." *Continuity and Change* 18(2), 2003, pages 139-165, Cambridge University Press

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

<sup>8</sup>Hyoun K. Kim and Patrick C. Mckenry, "Social Networks and Support: A Comparison of African Americans, Asian Americans, Caucasians, and Hispanics."

*Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, Vol. 29, 1998. Accessed on 29 November 2011 at <http://www.questia.com/googleScholar.qst?docId=5001449931>

<sup>9</sup>"*Homebuilders Target In-Laws, Dogs as Extended Families Grow*". John Gittlelsohn, Bloomberg, November 16, 2011. Accessed December 5, 2011 at <http://housingthink.com/index.php/2011/11/18/the-multigenerational-housingboom/>

<sup>10</sup>"Sun Cities" are locations where older adults live in or retire to areas within their own demographic.

<sup>11</sup>Neiderhaus, Sharon Graham and John L. Graham (2007), *Together Again*. Lanham, MD: M. Evans

<sup>12</sup>GU survey – please fill in.

<sup>13</sup>Bogolea, Kathleen, MS. *The Sandwich Generation*. Accessed December 5, 2011 at [http://www.caregiver.com/channels/rural/articles/sandwich\\_generation.htm](http://www.caregiver.com/channels/rural/articles/sandwich_generation.htm).

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