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Nine Ways Grandparenting is Changing with the COVID-19 Pandemic

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How has the COVID-19 pandemic changed grandparenting in the United States? Early in the pandemic, some grandparents were quarantining inside a bubble with their grandchildren, experiencing nearly constant contact. Others were quarantining outside the bubble, foregoing contact almost entirely.¹ As vaccines and treatments become more widespread and social lives veer toward normal, how can we expect grandparenting to change in the U.S.? Our review suggests that socio-demographic changes affecting births, employment, living arrangements, health, and communication will redefine grandparenting post-pandemic.

This brief assesses the socio-demographic changes that have accompanied the COVID-19 pandemic and uses in-depth interviews that we conducted before the pandemic to illustrate how grandparenting is shifting.

Lower Fertility Rates Mean Fewer Grandchildren

U.S. fertility rates have been dropping for years, and they dropped even more during the pandemic. Experts predict we may have about 300,000 fewer babies due to the pandemic.² The U.S. reached an all-time low for completed fertility in 2020, with each woman averaging 1.6 births in her lifetime. This is well below the 2.1 births needed to reach the replacement fertility rate (the number of births needed to replace two individuals).² Thus while most parents can still expect to become grandparents, they are likely to have fewer grandchildren.³

KEY FINDINGS

- Grandparents will have fewer grandchildren and will be older when babies arrive.
- Grandparents will be more likely to provide childcare, and many will juggle employment simultaneously.
- Grandparents will be more likely to live with and provide custodial care for grandchildren.
- Grandparents will be more likely to provide care to more generations, and more of those providing and receiving care will have disabilities.
- Grandparents will be more likely to cover more expenses for multiple generations.
- Grandparents will be more likely to use electronics to connect with grandchildren.

Later Births Mean Older First-Time Grandparents

The median age of first birth rose from 22.7 years old in 1980 to 26.9 in 2018, meaning that first-time grandparents are getting older.^{3,4} In 2019, age at first birth was 30.7 for Asians, 27.8 for Whites, 25.2 for Blacks, and 25.1 for Hispanics.⁵ Older grandparents are more likely to be retired, so they may have more time to dote on grandchildren, but with age they are also more likely to have health conditions that make activities such as chasing or bathing a toddler more challenging.⁶ Post pandemic, we expect to see the age of first-time grandparents continuing to increase.

More Working Families Are Turning to Grandparents for Childcare

Though millions left the labor force during the pandemic, most mothers of young children continue to be employed and in need of childcare. In the first two years of the pandemic, women's labor force participation declined by about 1.3% and men's declined by 1.1%, but the declines were more pronounced for those with less education.⁷ As Figure 1 shows, between 53% and 70% of all mothers with school-age children were employed and actively working in 2021, regardless of whether there was another working-age adult present in the home.

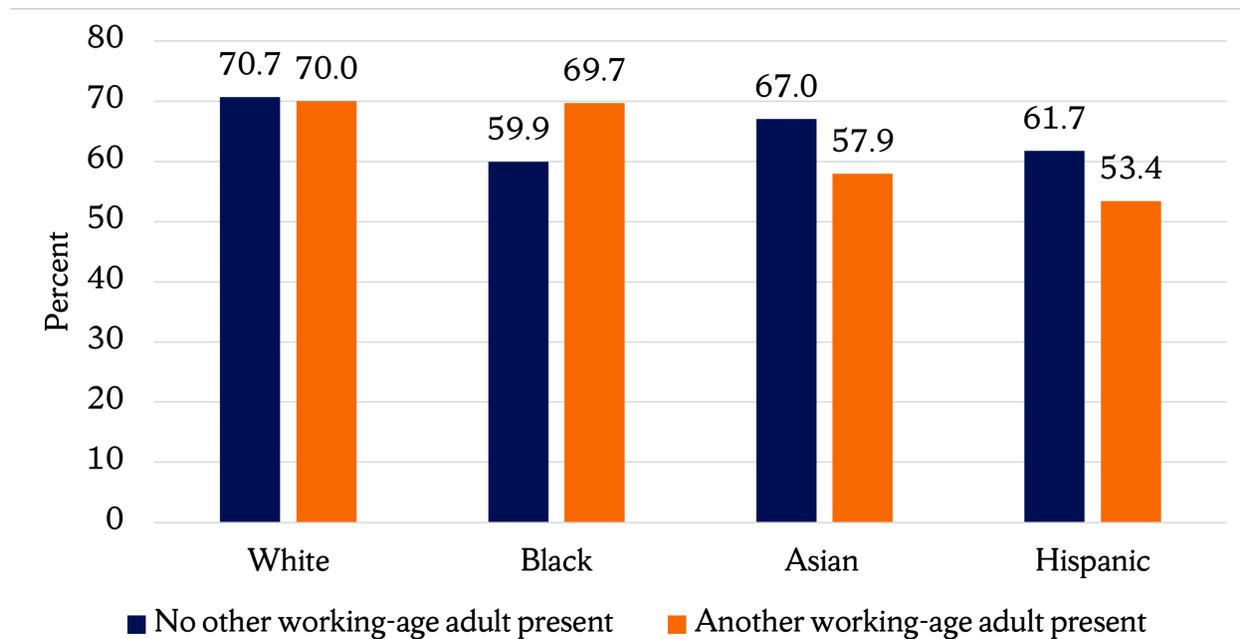


Figure 1: Percentage of Mothers of School-Age Children Employed and Working

Data Source: [Heggeness et al, 2021](#).

During the pandemic, many schools and day cares were closed, leaving fewer childcare options for families. Though most schools are now open, many childcare facilities did not survive. One study found that two-thirds of childcare centers were closed in April 2020 and one-third remained closed in April 2021.⁸ Notably non-white families are more likely to be affected by childcare closures than white families. Given that the pandemic reduced childcare options for many, we can expect to see even more working families look to grandparents to fill this need.

More Grandparents Are Juggling Employment and Childcare

Roughly 3 million adults retired early during the pandemic.⁷ Still, the majority of the near-old, who tend to have young grandchildren, remain employed. Indeed, many are juggling employment and childcare. In 2020, 71% of men and 60% of women ages 55-64 were employed.¹⁰ Many are using their vacation time and sick days to provide care for grandchildren, forfeiting their own paid time off.^{6,11} Many retire early, reduce hours, or change to more flexible jobs to be available for childcare. Some forego traveling so they can meet the bus every day. Some move cross country, leaving friends, neighbors, jobs, and churches behind to provide care.⁶

Co-residential and Custodial Grandparenting Are on the Rise

The number of children being raised by or living with grandparents in the United States doubled between 1970 and 2010.^{3,12} The increase has continued almost unabated during the pandemic in part because of pandemic-related job losses, housing losses, and recent inflation.¹³ Currently, about 2%, or 3 million, U.S. children are being raised by custodial grandparents. Another 3 million are living in grandparent-headed households with at least one parent present.¹² Furthermore, an estimated 200,000 U.S. children have lost a parent or primary caregiver to the coronavirus,¹⁸ and many grandparents have stepped up to provide care for their grandchildren.¹⁵

Often, grandparents cohabiting with grandchildren tend to have more health and financial insecurities.^{12,15} Moreover, the grandchildren they care for tend to have more physical, emotional, and developmental issues. The pandemic has exacerbated these problems, leaving some unable to pay bills while others face food insecurity.¹² Overseeing home schooling and catch-up schoolwork may be extremely challenging for many co-residential grandparents. Even before the pandemic, grandparents reported that homework, particularly math, was beyond their bandwidth. Taking on even more schoolwork responsibilities may feel like an insurmountable task for many.^{6,11}

More Grandparents Join the Club Sandwich Generation

Grandparents who are caring for and providing support to their adult children and their grandchildren are often also caring for their own parents.¹⁶ Because they are caring for three generations at once, these grandparents are part of what has been termed the club sandwich generation.¹¹ During the pandemic, reliance on group care settings for frail older relatives became more high risk as fatalities, staff shortages, visitation restrictions, and facility closures increased. Post pandemic, more families may be less likely to move older relatives into assisted living, board and care, or nursing homes.¹⁷ Families may be more likely to rely on grandparents for the care of great grandparents.

Many grandparents provide sequential care for one relative after another as the need arises, and others provide simultaneous care to multiple generations.¹¹ Some grandparents care for older and younger family members while still employed and others leave employment to provide care.^{6,11,16} Some bring their grandchildren with them when they stop in to care for their own parents helping them with dinner, baths, and bedtime only to take their grandkids home afterwards to assist them with the same activities.^{6,11} We expect to see the club sandwich generation grow in the wake of the pandemic.

More Grandparents and More Grandchildren Will have Disabilities

In the U.S., disability rates are rising for younger and older persons alike. Currently, nearly 17% of U.S. children have developmental disabilities, and the rates are rising.¹⁸ Moreover, disability among adults is rising, particularly for the near-elderly, ages 55-64.¹⁹ The CDC reports that 25% of all U.S. adults have

a disability.²⁰ Looking forward, we expect more grandparents with disabilities to be caring for more grandchildren with disabilities.

Providing care is often rewarding, but it may be more challenging when the care provider and/or the care recipient have disabilities. Whether they live hours away, nearby, or in the same house, many grandparents assist with routine care such as feeding, bathing, dressing, toileting, transportation, and schoolwork.^{6,11} Additionally, when grandchildren have disabilities, many grandparents provide intensive supervision or medical care which ranges from assisting with medications, therapies, and doctor visits to more invasive procedures, such as feeding tubes, suctioning, and catheters.⁶ Lifting grandchildren out of strollers, bathtubs, or wheelchairs, for example, can be very difficult for grandparents with limited mobility. Though many grandparents with disabilities are readily able to provide care for grandchildren with disabilities, others find that it takes a toll on their own physical and emotional wellbeing.⁶

Grandparents Are Bankrolling Even More Expenses

U.S. grandparents give their adult children and grandchildren tremendous amounts of financial support.^{6,11} A recent AARP poll found that 94% of grandparents provide financial support to grandchildren, averaging \$2,562 a year per grandparent.²¹ Older adults generally have a lot more wealth than younger adults. According to Federal Reserve data for 2019, the average net worth of those under age 35 was \$76,000, and median net worth was \$13,900. By contrast, for those aged 65-74, average net worth was \$1,217,700 and median was \$266,400.²²

We expect to see more grandparents covering even more of the expenses of younger generations following the pandemic in part due to the increased concentration of wealth and in part due to increasing inflation. Virtually all the 98 grandmothers we interviewed prior to the pandemic provided financial support to their children and grandchildren.^{6,11} A few of the very low-income grandmothers reported that they receive money from their children to help with expenses now and then, particularly gas or grocery money, but generally the money flowed only downstream. Some grandmothers pay for necessities including groceries, gas, diapers, and formula. Some pay the mortgage or rent so that the younger families have an independent place to live, while others have the younger generations move in with them and cover their expenses. Many pay for clothing, books, instruments, lessons, scientific calculators, tutors, and meals. Some pay for house cleaners, nannies, summer camps, private schools, and vacations. Some can easily afford to provide financial support while others gut their nest eggs or go into debt to provide assistance. One grandmother needed her oil changed but instead used the money to buy diapers. Another went hungry so that she could feed her grandchildren. By contrast, some grandparents rented enormous homes so the entire family could vacation in a bubble during the pandemic. This illustrates that bankrolling expenditures for multiple generations is easier for grandparents in higher, rather than the lower, income and wealth brackets.

More Grandparents Are Using Electronics to Connect with Grandchildren

Use of internet, smart phones, and various online platforms has risen steadily among the older population. Still, older adults lag behind younger age groups. For example, in 2021, while nearly 100% of those under age 65 report using the internet, only 75% of those 65 and older do.²³ Still, during the pandemic, millions of older Americans turned to Zoom, FaceTime, and other programs to see their grandchildren, friends, classmates, bridge partners, or colleagues. In many families, grandparents met grandchildren for the first time, read books, or even taught morning kindergarten over Zoom. Now that

the pandemic has shown more older adults the benefits of being more tech savvy, we expect greater reliance on electronics in the years ahead.²⁴ Grandparents who live far away from grandchildren have long been more likely to rely on electronic means of visiting. One grandfather we interviewed stays close to his grandson who has a disability by calling him every night before bed.⁶ Our review suggests that post-pandemic, we can expect nearly all grandparents to employ occasional virtual methods when spending time with their grandchildren.

Looking Ahead

Given the shortage of welfare state programs to support working families, U.S. grandparents are already providing more care for grandchildren than in many other countries.^{6,11} U.S. families need the same broad array of supports already available in most other developed nations, including federally-guaranteed paid vacations, sick days, parental leave, affordable childcare, and health insurance. Such supports would reduce the extent to which working families need to call upon grandparents for childcare. While most grandparents love spending time with their grandchildren, many would like to be able to do less parenting and be able to enjoy more grandparenting.

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