Grandparenting in Europe: Main study
Preliminary Findings Briefing

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The study

This briefing presents preliminary results of an international study on the role of grandparents in family life carried out by King’s College London and supported by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation in partnership with Grandparents Plus and the Beth Johnson Foundation. This project’s overall aim involves two interrelated issues: (1) what grandparenting looks like across selected European countries – including the diversity of grandparents, the families they care for, and the intensity and type of care that they provide, and (2) how family policies in different countries are specifically related to these varying patterns. This briefing focuses on the following two (out of the wider study’s four) objectives:

1. How do the living arrangements of grandparents vary across particular European countries and how have they changed over time?

2. How do the characteristics of grandparents vary across selected European countries in terms of age, living arrangements, tenure status, socio-economic status, education, and marital status, participation in paid work, retirement status and health?

The data

We address the two research questions stated above using different approaches and data sources. First, we examine patterns of co-residence between grandparents and grandchildren over time (with or without the parents being present) in England and Wales, France, Germany, Portugal and Romania (addressing the first research objective) using the Integrated Public Use Microdata Series International (IPUMS), the ONS Longitudinal Study for
England and Wales, and the German Socio-Economic Panel Study (SOEP). Multivariate analysis was used to examine how grandparents’ characteristics (e.g. employment status) are related to living arrangements.

Second, we investigated the characteristics of grandparents (addressing the second research objective) across 12 European countries using the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing (ELSA) and the Survey of Ageing, Health and Retirement (SHARE) which includes Austria, Germany, Sweden, the Netherlands, Spain, Italy, France, Denmark, Greece, Switzerland, and Belgium. Both surveys are based on people aged 50 and over and their partners and are comparable. We used the first wave of data collected in 2002/03 for ELSA and 2003/4 for SHARE. ELSA has information on close to 12,000 people and SHARE’s sample size in this wave was 29,917 people aged 50 and over (ranging from 1,707 in Denmark to 3,193 in France).

What do we already know about co-residence between grandparents and grandchildren?

Family ties among extended family members, such as those between grandparents and grandchildren, are likely to become more important in the future given changes in family behaviour (e.g. rises in divorce and step-families) and improvements in longevity. Until recently there was clear evidence of a decline in intergenerational co-residence in Western industrialised countries. However, research from the U.S. shows a significant increase in the prevalence of multi-generational and grandparent-headed households. Especially significant has been the rise in ‘skipped-generation households’ – those comprising grandparents living with their grandchildren without the child’s parents. This change has been attributed to both social changes, such as the parents’ drug or alcohol abuse, mental health problems or emotional difficulties, and policy changes. For example, following the decline of licensed foster homes in the US in the 1980s and 1990s placing children with relatives (often grandparents) reflected a major policy shift. As a result not only is kinship care increasing in the US, but in some states nearly as many children are being placed in kinship as in foster care. In recent work in England, Wales and Scotland using 1991 and 2001 census data Nandy and colleagues (2011) have also shown an increase in kinship care from the perspective of children under the age of 18 (that is children living in households where no parent is present).

Preliminary findings: Is grandparent co-residence increasing in Europe?

As noted above, the European countries studied in answering this question are England and Wales, France, Germany, Romania and Portugal. We distinguish between ‘three-generation households’ (comprising grandparents and grandchildren, with at least one of their parents) and ‘skipped-generation households’ (consisting of grandparents and grandchildren but without the parents). With the exception of Romania, and to a lesser extent Portugal, the other European countries studied (that is England and Wales, France, and Germany), showed a decline in the percentage of adults aged 40 and older residing in three-generation grandparent households. In England & Wales this percentage declined from 3.5% in 1981 to 1.6% in 2001. Nevertheless, there were over a million people in three-generation grandparent households in England and Wales in 2001 (the latest census date for which data is currently available). In contrast, our research shows that in the US there was a rise in three-generation households.
However England and Wales, like the U.S., showed an increase in the prevalence of skipped-generation households. In England & Wales this rose from 0.3% of adults aged 40 and over living in such households in 1981 to 0.5% in 2001. Overall, there were around 155,000 people in skipped-generation households in 2001. No other European country studied so far has followed this pattern.

In the European countries studied (as in the U.S.) grandparent households (whether three-generation or skipped-generation) are associated with socio-economic disadvantage. In general, the odds of residing in such households are greater among women, the unmarried (that is the widowed, divorced or separated), those with lower educational levels, the economically inactive (both unemployed and retired) and being born abroad.

Moreover, among adults aged 40 and over in skipped-generation households the odds of being female, married, in the lower educational groups, and economically inactive or unemployed are higher than for those in three-generation households. Those who were born abroad in the selected European countries studied are more likely to be in both three-generation and skipped-generation grandparent households in comparison to other households.

What do we already know about grandparents and caring for grandchildren?

The role of grandparents and grandparenting is growing in importance. Improvements in mortality have led to increases in families with three if not four living generations. Thus, family ties among extended family members are likely to become more important, such as those between grandparents and grandchildren. This means that there will be more grandparents alive potentially to take on supportive roles for their children and grandchildren. In Britain at age 20 over 80 per cent of the population have a living grandparent, with three or more generations of their family alive at the same time.

Thus it is likely that grandparents will become more prominent in the wider family network. In Britain, for example, there are currently 14 million grandparents. We know that that the majority of these grandparents play an important role in looking after grandchildren; for example nearly two thirds (63%) of grandparents in Britain with grandchildren under 16 provide some care for a grandchild and 17% provide at least 10 hours a week. Over half of grandparents in the SHARE countries provide some childcare to a grandchild under the age of 16. However, there are striking differences across Europe in the level and intensity of child care provided by grandparents. In Italy, Spain and Greece roughly 40% of grandparents provided regular childcare (almost weekly or more often) for a grandchild younger than 16, compared with 20% of grandparents in Sweden, France, and Denmark. On the other hand, more grandparents provide some childcare for a grandchild younger than 16 in Sweden, France, the Netherlands and Denmark (around 60%) than in the Southern European countries.

Preliminary Findings: What are grandparents like across Europe?

Grandparenthood

- Among adults over the age of 50, a higher percentage are grandparents in England (63%) than in the SHARE countries overall (58%). England and France are among the countries with the highest percentages of grandparents (63% and 64% respectively) with only slightly higher percentages in Denmark, Belgium and Sweden (around 65 to 67%); this compares, for example, to 53% in Italy. This is likely to reflect both higher fertility among the adult children of older grandparents in England and younger ages at childbearing in comparison, for example, to lower and delayed fertility among the adult children of Italian grandparents.
The odds of being a grandparent are similar in England, Austria and France (and are only marginally higher in Sweden, Denmark and Belgium); however, the odds of being a grandparent in England are significantly higher than in Germany, the Netherlands, Spain, Italy, Greece and Switzerland (even when age differences across the countries are taken into account). For example, the odds of older people being a grandparent in England are around 50% higher than in Italy.

**Age Profile**

- A higher percentage of grandparents in England (41%) are of working age (that is, in the 50-64 year age group) than in the SHARE countries overall (37%). Percentages range from a low of around one third in Spain and Italy to a high of 50% in Denmark.
- England ranked among the countries with the highest percentage of grandparents in the working age group similar to the Netherlands and France (as well as Austria, Sweden and Belgium). Only in Denmark are the odds of grandparents being in the working age group higher than in England, that is 50% higher. However, the odds of a grandparent being of working age in England are up to 43% higher for example than in Germany, Spain and Italy.

**Grandchildren**

- Even though Dutch and Spanish grandparents report significantly more children than their English counterparts, English grandparents have the most grandchildren among all SHARE countries.
- The overall mean number of grandchildren was 4.9\(^1\) among grandparents in England in comparison to 4.2 for grandparents in the SHARE countries. Across the European countries studied, the number of grandchildren ranged from a high of 4.9 in England to a low of 3.7 in Germany.
- English grandparents report among the highest number of grandchildren (similar to France and the Netherlands); grandparents in the other countries (that is in Austria, Germany, Sweden, Spain, Italy, Denmark, Greece, Switzerland and Belgium) report significantly fewer grandchildren. This continues to be the case even when differences in the age of grandparents across countries are taken into account. For example, English grandparents report on average one more grandchild in comparison to Italian, German and Greek grandparents.

**Age of Grandchildren**

- Among grandparents over 50, more than one in four grandparents in the SHARE countries had at least one grandchild under the age of 3, and over half had at least one grandchild under the age of 6. The percentage of grandparents reporting a grandchild under the age of 3 ranges from a low of around 20% in Germany to a high of 40% in the Netherlands; 33% of grandparents in France reported a grandchild under the age of 3. We do not have data on this question for England, but we suggest that England probably has a similar profile to France in this respect, because on many other grandparenting demographics, France and England are similar.

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\(^1\) Respondents in ELSA were asked the number of grandchildren and great-grandchildren whereas respondents in the SHARE countries were asked about grandchildren only. As around 16% of grandparents in SHARE also have great-grandchildren (and from the Gender and Generations Surveys we know that grandparents in Sweden, Norway, Germany and France have on average 2.5 great-grandchildren), we adjusted the SHARE data in order to make it more comparable with ELSA. Thus, for SHARE grandparents who stated that they had great-grandchildren 2.5 was added to the number of grandchildren reported. Even including this adjustment, the mean number of grandchildren in England is higher.
• French, Swedish, Spanish and Danish grandparents are among the most likely to have a grandchild under the age of 3 - only Dutch grandparents are more likely to have a grandchild in this age group; grandparents in the other countries tended to have older grandchildren. For example, the odds of grandparents in France having a grandchild under the age of 3 are twice as high as in Germany.

Marital Status

• As expected, the majority of grandparents are married: 69% in ELSA and 66% in the SHARE countries. The percentage ranged from a low of around 64% for example in Denmark and Germany to a high of 70% in the Netherlands.
• English grandparents are more likely to be married than Austrian, German, Swedish, and Danish grandparents (this holds even when age is taken into account); for example, the odds of English grandparents being married are 30% higher than German grandparents. There are no significant differences in the odds of being married between England and the Netherlands, Spain, Italy, France, Switzerland and Belgium once age is taken into account.

Wealth

• Close to one quarter of grandparents in ELSA and in the SHARE countries are in the bottom 20% of the wealth distribution that is among the poorest, meaning grandparents are disproportionately poor in relative terms. The percentage of grandparents in the bottom 20% of the wealth distribution ranges from 18-21% in Austria, Spain, Denmark and France (that is, not really different in terms of income distribution to the population as a whole in those countries) to almost 27% in Italy and Germany.
• There are few differences in the odds of grandparents being in the poorest 20% of the wealth distribution across the European countries studied; however, English grandparents are more likely to be in the bottom 20% of the wealth distribution than grandparents in Spain, France, Denmark and Switzerland. This relationship holds even when differences in the age of grandparents across countries are taken into account.

Paid Work

• More English grandparents are in paid work than the average across the SHARE countries: close to 1 in 4 grandparents are in paid work in England compared with about 1 in 7 grandparents in SHARE. 23% of grandparents in England are in paid work; only in Denmark and Sweden are more grandparents in paid work (29%). In comparison, only 9% of grandparents in Italy are in paid work.
• With the exception of Denmark and Sweden, English grandparents are significantly more likely to be in paid work in comparison to grandparents in the other countries studied (that is the German, Dutch, Spanish, Italian and French grandparents). Even controlling for age English grandparents remain among the most likely to be in paid work; this raises important policy issues.

Health Profile

• As the majority of those aged 50 and over are grandparents in the countries considered, the health profile of grandparents was found to be generally consistent with the general health profile of older people.

Self-reported health

• Among the over 50s, 30% of English grandparents rated their health as being fair or poor, compared to around 40% of grandparents in the SHARE countries. The percentage of
grandparents reporting being in fair or poor health ranged between 49% of Italian and Spanish grandparents to 14% of Swedish grandparents.

- English grandparents are among those least likely to report being in poor or fair health (versus being in good, very good or excellent health) among the countries studies (except for Swedish and Swiss grandparents) – the odds of English grandparents reporting poor or fair health are up to 50% lower than among grandparents in Germany, Spain, Italy, France and Greece. No significant difference in self-reported general health was found between English, Dutch, and Danish grandparents. Even after taking age into account English (and Swedish and Swiss) grandparents are still less likely to report poor or fair health.

**Depressive symptoms**

- Overall, 18% of English grandparents over 50 report depressive symptoms compared to 32% across the SHARE countries. This ranged between 18% (Denmark) to 40% (Italy and Spain) of grandparents report depressive symptoms.
- English grandparents are less likely to report depressive symptoms than all other SHARE countries except Denmark – the odds of grandparents in England reporting depressive symptoms are up to 33% lower than in Spain and Italy. Even after taking age into account English grandparents (with the exception of the Swiss) are still less likely to report depressive symptoms.
- Thus, in general, English grandparents are less likely to report poor self-rated health and depressive symptoms than grandparents in the other countries studied.

**Functional limitations**

- However, English grandparents are more likely to report functional limitations such as with mobility in comparison to grandparents in the SHARE countries. For example, 63% of English grandparents report one or more mobility limitations, compared with 58% of grandparents in the SHARE countries. Across the countries studied the percentage of grandparents reporting at least one mobility limitation ranges from a low of 45% (Denmark) to a high of 62% (Italy, Spain and Germany).
- The odds of grandparents in England reporting at least one mobility limitation are between 1.4 to 2 times higher than in Austria, Sweden, France and Denmark. There are no significant differences in the odds of reporting at least one mobility limitation between England and Germany. This relationship holds even when age is taken into account.

**Future work:**

When the 2011 census data becomes available around 2015 it would be interesting to see if trends in intergenerational co-residence noted in this interim report have continued, although this will be beyond the scope of our current research. In forthcoming work, we are currently investigating how variations across Europe in the diversity of grandparents are associated with variations in childcare by grandparents in addition to examining how family and other policies are related to these patterns of grandparenting.

**References**


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1 In this report when we talk about SHARE countries we mean all the countries included in the survey, that is Austria, Germany, the Netherlands, Spain, Italy, France, Denmark, Greece, Switzerland and Belgium.

2 Defined here as the net value of the primary residence, other properties owned, non-housing financial wealth (such as stocks, bonds and saving accounts) and business assets (including shares).

3 Defined here as any difficulties with mobility (or upper-limb) and/or physical (or upper limb) function which are jointly referenced to as the NAGI index.