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Descriptive Finding

Grandchildren's spatial proximity to grandparents and intergenerational support in the United States

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Grandchildren's spatial proximity to grandparents and intergenerational support in the United States

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Abstract

BACKGROUND

Grandparents regularly spend time with their grandchildren and may also depend on their adult children for help as they age. These patterns suggest that many family members live close enough to one another to provide in-person assistance. However, empirical evidence on grandparent–grandchild proximity and intergenerational transfers remains limited.

OBJECTIVE

We measure grandchild–grandparent spatial proximity, describing which families live close by and whether proximity is linked to intergenerational exchanges of time and money.

METHODS

We use US data from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics and the 2013 Rosters and Transfers Module. We present descriptive patterns of spatial proximity and intergenerational transfers among families with grandchildren.

RESULTS

We find that most grandchildren live very close to a grandparent. Almost half of households with grandchildren live within 10 miles of a grandparent, and 13% live within 1 mile. Closer spatial proximity is more common when parents (of grandchildren) have less education, are unmarried, or earn lower incomes. Households living close to grandparents help and receive help from grandparents more often, and for more total hours, than those living farther away. Monetary transfers do not vary by spatial proximity.

CONCLUSIONS

Findings have potential implications for the well-being of all three generations.

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CONTRIBUTION

Prior research largely focuses on parents and their adult children, regardless of whether grandchildren are present; however, patterns of both proximity and support, and their implications, likely differ when grandchildren are present. We provide updated estimates of intergenerational spatial proximity and transfers specifically among families with grandchildren. We also measure proximity using fine-grained distance categories not common in past studies.

1. Introduction

This study measures the spatial proximity between grandchildren and grandparents in the United States and explores the role proximity plays in exchanges of time and money across generations. About 50% of preschool-aged children, 35% of elementary school–aged children, and 20% of teens spend time with a grandparent in a typical week (Dunifon, Near, and Ziol-Guest 2018). Middle-aged adults also increasingly care for aging grandparents while raising their own children (Roots 2021). These patterns suggest that grandparents, adult children, and grandchildren live close enough to offer regular inperson time and support. Yet empirical evidence on grandchild–grandparent proximity and its role in intergenerational transfers is sparse. The most recent estimates of grandchild–grandparent proximity come from data collected in the 1990s (Dunifon and Bajracharya 2012), and research on intergenerational time and financial transfers tends to focus on adult children and parents rather than families with grandchildren.

We measure proximity between households with grandchildren and those with grandparents using nationally representative data from the 2013 wave of the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID). We explore which types of families tend to live close to one another and whether proximity is linked to exchanges of time and money. We refer to grandparents as G1, their adult children as G2, and their grandchildren as G3. We measure grandparent–grandchild proximity by examining distances between G1 households and G2 households with G3 children. Given that 96% of US children live with at least one parent, this captures the vast majority of children (Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics 2023).

A key contribution of our paper is the ability to capture distance at a fine-grained level of detail not common in the literature on intergenerational spatial proximity. Researchers have defined "close" proximity as within 25–30 miles (e.g., Choi et al. 2020, 2021; Compton and Pollak 2015, 2014; Hoyert 1991) or within US Census tracts (e.g., Daw, Verdery, and Patterson 2019) because more precise residential address data are difficult to obtain. These studies suggest that most adults in the United States (regardless

of whether grandchildren are present) live "close" to a parent. For example, Choi and colleagues (2020) document that three-quarters of adults in the United States live within 30 miles of a parent. In contrast, we measure variation in spatial distance more precisely, distinguishing households that live within 1 mile of each other (walking distance) from those that live 1–5 miles away (nearby but likely requiring transportation). Unlike most previous studies, we focus on G2 households with G3 children (the grandchildren of G1 households), as patterns of proximity and exchange, and their implications likely differ when looking at grandparents and their adult children/grandchildren given the high level of involvement and the important role many grandparents play in the lives of their grandchildren (Dunifon, Near, and Ziol-Guest 2018).

Research on transfers between young adults and their parents in the United States (regardless of whether families have grandchildren) finds that financial, time, and in-kind transfers are quite common (McGarry 2016; Wiemers and Park 2021; Yang and Ripoll 2021). Time transfers tend to be reciprocal between adult children and parents, but financial transfers more often flow from parents to adult children (Wiemers and Park 2021). To our knowledge, only one study focuses on intergenerational transfers between grandparents and grandchildren in the United States. Ho (2015) explores how families' child care needs relate to transfers of time and money from grandparents, finding higher rates of time transfers from grandparents after the birth of a grandchild and among families living within 10 miles of a grandparent. We build on the findings in Ho (2015) by exploring transfers not only *from* grandparents but also *to* them and by estimating patterns of transfers across a continuum of grandchild–grandparent distance.

We address three descriptive research questions. First, how close do grandchildren live to grandparents? Second, what are the characteristics of families where grandchildren and grandparents live close to one another? Third, when households with grandchildren live close to grandparents, are they more likely to transfer time and money?

2. Data

We use US-based nationally representative data from the PSID and focus on the 2013 Rosters and Transfers Module (R&T). The R&T asks whether households received time or money from their parents and if so how much. It also asks whether they gave time or money to their parents and if so how much. Our analysis focuses on G2 households in the R&T: those with at least one child under age 18 living in their home and with at least one living grandparent.

We supplement the R&T data with restricted access data on families' residential locations from the 2013 core PSID. The core PSID includes the census block for each household in the survey. Census blocks are the smallest level of geography for which US

Census data are available (0.03 square miles on average among G2 households in our sample). When we link R&T responses to core PSID data on census blocks of residence, we can measure grandchild–grandparent spatial proximity at a very fine-grained scale. However, because we rely on the core PSID survey for residential location, we must restrict our analysis to grandparents who are in both the R&T and the core PSID. The core PSID typically follows only one set of grandparents (maternal or paternal), not both. Figure 1 diagrams those included in our sample.



Figure 1: PSID data structure and analytic sample inclusion

Notes: Shaded figures represent family members included in our analytical sample. Empty figures reflect individuals in the R&T but not in the core PSID, whom we exclude because we do not observe the census block where they live. All R&T respondents over the age of 18 report on transfers to/from children and grandparents to whom they are related. We use R&T data on transfers that G2 households report based on questions shown in the figure. We do not use data about transfers reported by G1 households in our analyses. Thus the questions asked of G1 households in the R&T are not shown on this figure.

Our sample includes 1,951 unique G2 households, which generate 2,032 G2 reports of transfers to/from grandparents. A single G2 household in our sample may report on transfers to/from multiple sets of grandparents when multiple grandparent households are also in the core PSID. Of the 1,951 G2 households in our sample, 511 (26%) report on transfers with more than one grandparent household. We exclude from our sample G2

households with coresident grandparents (n = 187), given that prior research has focused on this group (e.g., Dunifon, Near, and Ziol-Guest 2018) and that transfers of time and money may be more fluid when all three generations live under one roof.

3. Method and measures

To address our research questions, we present averages and cross-tabulations among G2 households in our sample. We measure grandchild–grandparent proximity as the distance in miles between the centroids of census blocks that contain G1 and G2 households' residential addresses. We define discrete grandchild–grandparent distance groups as: (1) < 1 mile, (2) 1 to < 5 miles, (3) 5 to < 10 miles, (4) 10 to < 30 miles, (5) 30 to < 100 miles, (6) 100 to < 500 miles, and (7) 500+ miles.

We explore which types of families tend to live close to one another based on the characteristics of G2 mothers (age, race/ethnicity, marital status, and education); characteristics of G2 households (unmarried/single household head, all G2s working fulltime, total G2 income from salary/wages, any foreign-born G2, any G2 in poor health, number of G2's children under 18, age of G2's youngest child, any of G2's children under age 5, and residence in a rural census block); and characteristics of G1 families (maternal or paternal grandparent[s] of the G2 household, any G1 in poor health, all G1s employed, and number of G1's own children).

Our measures of intergenerational transfers come from the R&T and reference the 2012 calendar year. For time transfers, we rely on G2 reports of whether they spent time helping G1 (and how much) and whether G1 spent time helping them (and how much). For monetary transfers, we use G2 reports of whether they gave or received any "money, loans, or gifts" to or from G1 (and how much). We aggregate the total amount of transfers provided/received to the annual level. All transfer data are reported by G2 households.

4. Results

4.1 How close do grandchildren live to grandparents?

Results addressing our first research question are presented in Figure 2, which shows the percent of G2 households living in each range of distance from the grandparents in our sample. Summing across the three closest distance categories, we find that almost half of grandchildren live within 10 miles of a grandparent (47%), and roughly one-third live within 5 miles (34%). The use of fine-grained data reveals sizeable variation at the closest range of the geographic scale, details missed in analyses where those living within larger

geographic distances (e.g., 10, 25, or 30 miles) were grouped together. Our results show that just as many grandchildren live within 1 mile of their grandparents as live 500 miles or more away.



Figure 2: Grandchild–grandparent spatial distance

Source: Some of the data used in this analysis are derived from the Restricted Data Files of the PSID, obtained under special contractual arrangements designed to protect the anonymity of respondents. These data are *not* available from the authors. Persons interested in obtaining PSID Restricted Data Files should contact PSIDHelp@umich.edu.

4.2 In which types of families do grandchildren and grandparents live very close to one another?

Results for our second research question are shown in Table 1. Each column displays the share of families within a geographic distance from grandparents (e.g., within less than 1 mile) who have a given characteristic (e.g., a high school degree or less).

Notes: Displays the percent of G2 households by proximity to G1. Distance in miles reflects the shortest path between census block centroids that contain home addresses. Distance categories include the lower bound and exclude the upper bound. For example, the category "1–5 mi" includes families living 1 mile to less than 5 miles from a grandparent. The category "< 1 mi" also includes families living within the same census block. Coresident G1s, G2s, and G3s are excluded from the sample. Estimates are weighted using PSID 2013 family weights.

	< 1 mi	1–5 mi	5–10 mi	10–30 mi	30–100 mi	100–500 mi	500+ mi
G2 Mother							
Age (in years)	36.03	35.60	37.66	37.87	38.63	39.44	38.57
White	0.70	0.65	0.79	0.76	0.83	0.76	0.78
Black	0.13	0.20	0.12	0.12	0.12	0.09	0.11
Hispanic	0.12	0.13	0.07	0.11	0.04	0.10	0.07
High school or less	0.39	0.35	0.30	0.29	0.24	0.20	0.20
Some college	0.33	0.35	0.28	0.29	0.28	0.17	0.27
College or higher	0.26	0.30	0.41	0.42	0.47	0.63	0.51
G2 Household							
Unmarried/single head	0.31	0.30	0.24	0.24	0.15	0.15	0.20
Full-time work (both G2s)	0.49	0.49	0.59	0.57	0.57	0.50	0.44
Income (both G2s)	63,923	64,219	83,339	79,611	87,548	142,745	138,144
Foreign born (either G2)	0.10	0.09	0.06	0.11	0.04	0.06	0.11
Fair/poor health (either G2)	0.11	0.14	0.15	0.12	0.09	0.14	0.08
Number of children	2.05	1.94	1.92	1.93	2.00	1.96	1.94
Age of youngest child	7.08	6.24	7.46	6.87	6.85	7.06	7.05
Any child under age 5	0.39	0.47	0.35	0.39	0.41	0.39	0.42
Lives in rural census block	0.29	0.18	0.28	0.25	0.27	0.19	0.16
G1 Characteristics							
Maternal grandparent(s)	0.63	0.61	0.57	0.65	0.60	0.51	0.51
Fair/poor health (any G1)	0.31	0.32	0.42	0.34	0.30	0.32	0.37
Employed (all G1s)	0.40	0.44	0.46	0.39	0.38	0.34	0.35
Observations (n = 2,032)	266	418	274	340	212	261	261

Table 1:Characteristics of G1 and G2 households by grandchild-grandparent
spatial proximity

Notes: The table displays sample means among G2 households from the R&T linked to the 2013 PSID. Distances reflect the shortest path between census block centroids that contain home addresses. Distance categories include the lower bound shown and exclude the upper bound. For example, the category "1-5 mi" includes families living 1 mile to less than 5 miles from a grandparent. The category "<1 mi" also includes families living within the same census block. Full-time work is defined as 35 hours per week. Household income is the total salary/wages of household heads. The sample excludes coresident G1s, G2s, and G3s. Estimates are weighted using PSID 2013 family weights. A small number of G2 mother characteristics are based on fathers when the household is led by a single father. We do not exclude missing data, and thus some categories do not add to 100%. For example, G2 mother education levels add to 98.5% within each distance category, meaning that 1.5% of the sample is missing G2 mother education data. The sample includes 1,951 unique G2 mother/G2 households. These G2 households report on exchanges with 2,032 G1 households. The 2,032 G1 households. The 2,032 G1 households represent 2,822 individual grandparents.

Source: Some of the data used in this analysis are derived from the Restricted Data Files of the PSID, obtained under special contractual arrangements designed to protect the anonymity of respondents. These data are *not* available from the authors. Persons interested in obtaining PSID Restricted Data Files should contact PSIDHelp@umich.edu.

Families in which grandchildren live close to grandparents tend to have lower socioeconomic status, as proxied by level of education, marital status, and income. For example, 39% of G2 mothers who live within 1 mile of a grandparent have a high school degree or less, compared to 20% of those living farthest from grandparents (500 miles or more). Consistent with this pattern, more than half of G2 mothers living far from grandparents have a college degree or greater, compared to about one-quarter of G2 mothers living within 1 mile. We also find that G2 mothers living closer to grandparents are more likely to be unmarried and earn less income. Other factors, such as a G2

mother's race/ethnicity, number and ages of children, and propensity to live in a rural census block, do not vary by spatial proximity. Last, grandchildren are more likely to live near maternal grandparents: For 63% of G2 families who live within 1 mile of a grandparent, we are measuring distance to the maternal grandparent, compared to 51% of families who live 500 miles away or farther.

4.3 When grandchildren and grandparents live close to one another, are they also more likely to transfer time and money?

Table 2 presents patterns of intergenerational transfers by grandchild–grandparent distance. The top panel (panel a) shows time transfers received from and given to grandparents by their adult children (G2 households), and the bottom panel (panel b) shows monetary transfers. In each panel, we present the share of G2 households that receive or give any transfers, as well as the median total transfer amount per year (in hours or dollars) conditional on having received or given a transfer. We present these summary statistics broken out by fine-grained categories of grandchild–grandparent distance. We conduct F-tests to assess whether the differences in transfers (any/amount) across distance categories are statistically different from 0, with results shown in the final two columns of Table 2.

The propensity for G1 and G2 to spend time helping one another is higher when they live closer. For example, 61% of G2 households living within 1 mile of grandparents report that grandparents spend time helping them, and nearly the same share of G2 households (62%) living within 1 mile report spending time helping grandparents. The likelihood of time transfers to and from grandparents declines as grandchild–grandparent distance grows. The median number of hours G2 and G1 spend helping one another per year also declines as grandchild–grandparent distance grows. F-tests suggest that observed patterns are meaningfully different by distance.

We also observe that, regardless of grandchild–grandparent distance, grandparents provide more total hours of time-based help to their adult children/grandchildren than they receive from them. For example, the median G2 household receives 208 hours per year *from* G1 but gives only 128 hours per year *to* G1 if living within 1 mile.

	< 1 mi	1–5 mi	5–10 mi	10–30 mi	30–100 mi	100–500 mi	500+ mi	F-stat (H ₀ : diff = 0)	p(F)
Time Transfers									
Received by G2 from G1									
Any time (% of G2s)	0.61	0.55	0.51	0.54	0.46	0.40	0.35	9.742	0.000
Median hours/yr (conditional on any)	208	186	120	100	100	80	80	5.655	0.000
Given by G2 to G1									
Any time (% of G2s)	0.62	0.52	0.45	0.51	0.37	0.32	0.27	18.983	0.000
Median hours/yr (conditional on any)	128	104	60	55	60	60	48	4.431	0.000
Monetary Transfers									
Received by G2 from G1									
Any money (% of G2s)	0.27	0.28	0.23	0.24	0.21	0.26	0.27	0.851	0.530
Median \$/yr (conditional on any)	900	800	1100	500	1000	1000	2000	0.766	0.597
Given by G2 to G1									
Any money (% of G2s)	0.25	0.18	0.13	0.18	0.11	0.11	0.16	4.601	0.000
Median \$/yr (conditional on any)	800	500	500	500	500	1000	400	0.679	0.667
Observations (n = 2,032)	266	418	274	340	212	261	261		

Table 2: Time and money transfers by grandchild–grandparent distance

Notes: The table displays sample means among G2 households from the R&T linked to the 2013 PSID, broken out by distance from G1. Distances reflect the shortest path between census block centroids that contain home addresses. Distance categories include the lower bound shown and exclude the upper bound. For example, the category "1–5 mi² includes families living 1 mile to less than 5 miles from a grandparent. The category "< 1 mi² also includes families living within the same census block. The sample excludes coresident G1s, G2s, and G3s. Estimates are weighted using PSID 2013 family weights. The column labeled "F-stat (H₀: diff = 0)" displays the F statistic of the test of the null hypothesis that the difference across the "means by distance" category is 0. The column labeled "(F)" shows the p value corresponding to the F statistic.

Source: Some of the data used in this analysis are derived from the Restricted Data Files of the PSID, obtained under special contractual arrangements designed to protect the anonymity of respondents. These data are *not* available from the authors. Persons interested in obtaining PSID Restricted Data Files should contact PSIDHelp@umich.edu.

Unlike transfers of time, the frequency of monetary transfers does not vary consistently by spatial proximity. A similar share of G2 households in each distance category, roughly 21%–28%, receives money from grandparents in roughly similar median amounts. One exception is that at the farthest distance from grandparents (500+ miles), the median G2 household receives \$2,000 per year from grandparents, almost double the next highest amount received. In terms of monetary transfers to grandparents, similar shares of G2 households provide financial help, regardless of distance, with one exception. Those who live closest to grandparents, within 1 mile, are more likely to give than those across all other distance quarters (25% vs. less than 20%). An F-test suggests that the share of G2 households providing money to grandparents does meaningfully differ by distance, though is neither uniformly increasing nor decreasing with distance.

We also observe that, regardless of grandchild–grandparent distance, G2 households are more likely to receive money from grandparents than to provide it to them.

Given that we find that households with lower socioeconomic status live closer to grandparents, we replicate estimates in Table 2 controlling for G2 mother's level of education and G2 household marital status. We find that the descriptive pattern of results in Table 2 remains qualitatively unchanged (results available upon request). We also replicate Table 2 among only paternal grandparents and find that transfer patterns look similar (results available upon request), suggesting that our findings hold whether G1 is a maternal or paternal grandparent.

5. Discussion

Our results highlight several findings related to intergenerational support. First, substantial numbers of grandchildren live very close to a grandparent – almost half live within 10 miles, and 13% live less than 1 mile from a grandparent. Additionally, the characteristics of G2 households living very close to grandparents differ from characteristics of those living just a little farther away, particularly in terms of mother's education and marital status.

Next, we find that transfers of time vary in meaningful ways at the closest end of our geographic distance measure. G2 parents living within 1 mile of the grandparent both receive and give time at a much higher rate than those just 5 or 10 miles farther away. This suggests that family members living in very close proximity are highly embedded in each other's lives, likely in ways beyond the scope of our study. This is a group worthy of further study to understand how they select such living arrangements and what the implications are for the well-being of all three generations involved.

In contrast, we find that transfers of money do not vary meaningfully by geographic distance except at the very closest end (within 1 mile of a grandparent). This indicates that grandparents who live far away from their grandchildren do not make up for their limited ability to invest time by giving more money, though G2 families living far may be more financially secure and less in need of monetary transfers.

G2 households are more likely to receive time and money, and receive more time and money, than they give to G1s. For example, among grandparent and grandchild households living 1–5 miles apart, G2s received 186 hours of help from G1s per year and gave only 104 hours of help to G1s. Similarly, G2s received \$800 per year in financial support and gave \$500 to G1s. In contrast, previous work that does not look specifically at grandchildren finds reciprocal time transfers (Wiemers and Park 2021). Time-use data suggest that a significant part of the time transfers between grandparent and grandchild households may involve child care (Dunifon, Near, and Ziol-Guest 2018), which is likely to have implications for the well-being of grandchildren (in terms of stable child care), their parents (who might receive support while working, for example), and the grandparents themselves, with some evidence suggesting greater subjective well-being when grandparents spend time with their grandchildren (Dunifon, Musick, and Near 2020). This highlights the importance of examining grandparent–grandchild proximity and transfers specifically.

These results shed new light on intergenerational transfers between grandparents and households with grandchildren. We highlight the significant numbers of grandchildren living in very close proximity to their grandparents and demonstrate that geographic distance, at a very fine scale, is linked to time investments to and from G2 households. We find that when families live far apart, grandparents do not make up for their lack of time investment by investing more money, perhaps because G2 families living farther away are often of higher socioeconomic status. Future research can examine implications for the well-being of all three generations.

Finally, we note two limitations of our study. First, we are not able to shed light on patterns of transfers or distance from grandparents not included in the core PSID. Future research could collect more precise residential address data on all grandparents to allow for a more comprehensive analysis of patterns of distance and intergenerational transfers. Second, research suggests that grandparents and adult children move closer to each other in anticipation of fertility events (Anstreicher and Venator 2022; Rutigliano, Schnor, and Zilincikova 2023; Smits 2010). Residential selection behaviors may be part of the descriptive patterns we document, and future research could work to disentangle this.

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