

# **Between elderly parents and grandchildren: geographic proximity and trends in four- generation families**

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## **Abstract**

In an ageing society, families may have an important role in the caretaking and well-being of the elderly. Demographic changes have an impact on the size and structure of families; one aspect is how intergenerational support is distributed when there is a need for support to both older and younger generations at the same time. Another vital aspect of the provision of care for the elderly is geographic proximity. This study is oriented towards the potential “both-end carers” i.e. persons who have grandchildren in potential need of care while still having living ageing parents. The incidence of having grandchildren and having living parents at age 55 and the proximity between generations is described using Swedish register data. The results show that the share of 55-year-olds who are grandparents decreased dramatically from 70 to 35 percent between 1990 and 2005. As expected, more 55-year-olds have living parents – a proportion that increased from 37 to 47 percent during this period. As a result of delayed childbearing among the children of these cohorts, the likelihood of belonging to a four-generation family among 55-year-olds has not increased, despite increased longevity. Furthermore, most individuals live within daily reach of their kin and no evidence was found of a trend of increasing geographic distances between generations.

## ***Introduction***

In multigenerational families with three, four and five generations still living, support and contact between generations are often crucial social resources for both the young and the old generations, especially if the younger and older family members live close by and if other resources in the family are scarce. Even in societies with a strong public sector, assistance to adult children, grandchildren and elderly parents is a vital complement to the support from public institutions, but at times is also a burden to the generation between the elderly parents and grandchildren. Hence the incidence of, for instance, three- or four-generation families and the geographic proximity between generations may be crucial for living conditions in the everyday life of the elderly, the young families and the generation squeezed in between, sometimes called the “sandwich generation”. The demographic trends obviously have implications on both individuals and society at large; as populations age, family structures change, and possibly also do the functions of families (Harper 2003, Trommsdorff and Nauck 2006). Individuals’ roles in families alter over the life course, starting out as a child and then becoming sibling, partner, parent and eventually grandparent and even great-grandparent. And

evidently the family composition, for instance the number of generations alive, influences the functions individuals have within families.

The number of living generations within families are a mainly a result of two demographic processes, namely longevity and age gaps between generations. One element in the “bean-pole hypothesis” introduced by Bengtson et al. (1990) is the notion that the number of living generations is increasing in an ageing society due to increased longevity and that a growing number of people therefore live in four- and even five-generation families. But such development is counteracted by an increase in intergenerational gap. This study aims to scrutinize the effect of these two demographic processes on the incidence of four generation families. Moreover, the possibilities for daily contact and assistance between generations are also influenced by the geographic proximity between generations, and Meil (2006) argues that the real threat to strong intergenerational ties is not falling fertility rates or other changes in the family structure but rather increasing geographic distances.

This paper explores preconditions for multigenerational relationships by looking at two aspects: the number of generations within families and the geographic proximity between family members. The focus is directed towards the potential “both-end carers” living in four generational families i.e. persons who have grandchildren in potential need of care while still having living ageing parents. This group is potential care-givers to both the older and younger generations, and it is therefore interesting to study the trends concerning the share of middle-aged individuals who experience such a family position. Certainly, “both-and –carerrrs” may be found also in three generational families with elderly parents and children still living at home, but as demonstrated in previous studies, this is a quite rare phenomenon (Grundy and Henretta 2006, Künemund 2006). Thus, the focal point here is the occurrence of four

generational families and how it changes over time. The second vital aspect studied is the geographic proximity between generations, since this strongly influences the ability to provide assistance on a regular basis.

The incidence of having grandchildren as well as living parents at age 55 is described using Swedish register data. Additionally, we study the trends of geographic distances between generations and the differences between families by educational background. The empirical study aims at examining the current pattern of incidence of four-generation families and the trend during the period 1990-2005.

The outline of the paper is as follows: First a theoretical background is presented on demographic changes and the demographic processes that form the structures of families, as well as the importance of geographic proximity for family care. This section is followed by the results from the empirical study on the incidence of elderly parents and grandchildren among 55-year-olds in Sweden for the period 1990-2005, including an analysis of socio-economic differentials, and further, the trends regarding geographic proximity.

### **Aging populations and families**

As the age pyramids of population are reshaped, the demographic structures of families and the incidence of four-generation families, for instance, are also changing. The number of generations in families is currently the outcome of three demographic processes: increased longevity, decreased fertility and longer intergenerational spacing. Individual ageing in terms of increased longevity has resulted in an increase in the number of living generations, while the decrease in fertility has not only resulted in a higher frequency of childlessness but has also reduced the number of horizontal family links in terms of siblings and cousins. This

development of more vertical and fewer horizontal kinship links is one important feature of what has been called the “beanpole family”, or the verticalization of families (Bengtson, Rosenthal and Burton 1990). The number of living generations has certainly increased from a longer historical perspective as a result of the demographic transition. But when this development is discussed there is often an underlying assumption that this is an ongoing process of an increase in the number of people who will experience a four- or even five-generation family situation (Hagestad and Uhlenberg 2007, Laslett 1997). The development of increasing numbers of living generations within families is, however, counteracted by the increase in intergenerational spacing. The age of women when they give birth for the first time has increased in all the countries in Western Europe during recent decades. Mean age has risen to 29 years and older, not only in Sweden but also in Spain, Switzerland and the Netherlands (Hantrais, Philipov and Billari 2005). The postponement of childbearing has resulted in longer intergenerational spacing, and declining fertility has reduced the size of subsequent cohorts. Parenthood and grandparenthood are thereby delayed, counteracting the development of more frequent four-generation families. In a study of the frequency of four-generation families in the United States, Matthews and Sun (2006) found that this was more common in low-educated and black families despite the lower life expectancy in this group. Matthews and Sun therefore suggest that it is the timing of childbearing that is more important for the occurrences of four-generation families rather than longevity. The interrelation of the processes of increased longevity, postponed childbearing and decreasing fertility is well known, but the combined outcome of trends regarding these processes is difficult to assess on an aggregate level. This process is therefore not well described empirically, and it has also been discussed whether or not we can expect a continuation of the increase in the number of living generations (Grundy and Henretta 2006, Harper 2003, Leeson 2004).

From his time geographical perspective (1975, 1991), Hägerstrand pointed to the role of intertwined life trajectories and claimed that the presence, proximity and distance to, for instance, relatives, as well as the time-space location of joint projects and commitments, are crucial in shaping both everyday life and individual life courses. According to a family life course perspective (Elder 1994), individuals' lives are linked with friends and kin in interdependence, and therefore events like divorce, childbirth, illness and migration in the lives of family members such as parents and adult children are important to the individual. The structure of kin networks is therefore important in people's lives and so are the sequence, incidence and duration of life course events and social roles, or what Elder refers to as social timing. An effect of increased longevity is that we spend more years in the same social relations. At the same time as divorce rates are increasing, there is also an increase in the number of couples experiencing their 50<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary. Sibling and child-parent relations are also stretched out over time. Bengtson (2001) argues that as the demographic ageing process is resulting in "longer years of shared lives between generations" intergenerational relations are becoming increasingly important to individuals, and that especially grandparents will have an increasingly important function in family life. Not only the timing of childbearing, but also the number of children, is important for the emergence of multigenerational families. The more children you have, the more likely it is that you will have become a grandparent at a given age. The likelihood of not becoming a grandparent at all is naturally higher if you only have one child. Harper (2005) argues that the decline in total number of relatives will make our relationships to the relatives we have more important. For relations between people of the same generation, increased longevity inevitably leads to "longer years of shared life" but for grandchild-grandparent relations, the intergenerational gaps determine whether or not grandparenthood and great-grandparenthood relations will also

be subject to longer years of shared life and whether more people will live in four- or even five-generation families in the future.

### **Family Care**

The ability to give support is affected by the multigenerational family structures: the extent to which we have elderly parents and children and grandchildren. One important aspect is how intergenerational support is distributed when there is a need for support to both older and younger generations at the same time. This dilemma has previously been discussed in terms of “sandwich generation” (Grundy and Henretta 2006, Künemund 2006) or “both-end carers”(Westland 2008). The concept of sandwich generation has been used to describe the situation of middle-aged people (especially women) who are in a position of caring for elderly parents while still having dependent children, and who have to deal with these caring responsibilities while still active on the labour market. Several studies have concluded, however, that this is a quite unusual situation (Grundy and Henretta 2006, Künemund 2006). By the time the parents and parents-in-law of the middle-aged are old and fragile and in need of care, their children have already left the parental home. At least this seems to be the current situation; in the future, longer intergenerational spacing may result in growing numbers of sandwich generation women. The sandwich generation concept has also been criticized (for instance by Grundy and Henretta 2006) from the point of view that the mere existence of parents, children and grandchildren competing for attention is not necessarily experienced as a burden and is not always an issue of a trade-off between care and support to family members in both older and younger generations at the same time. Grundy and Henretta (2006) found that there does not seem to be an issue of one generation being prioritized over another but rather that the parents who give a great deal of support to their adult children also provide a

great deal of support to their elderly parents and vice-versa. Some families seem to be “high exchangers” regardless of how many generations they contain.

Also, in a society with an extensive welfare state and high female labour market participation, family care is important for elderly care, parallel to public care (Szebehely 2006). Several studies have shown that functional support is more prevalent from the older to the younger generation rather than the other way around: older generations are very important providers of financial, emotional and functional support to younger generations (Albertini, Kohli and Vogel 2007, Halleröd 2006, Hoff 2007).

Family care and support come in different forms, for instance functional, financial or emotional. Emotional or financial support can be provided across long geographic distances but the ability to functionally provide care on a regular basis is strongly dependent on geographic proximity. Geographic distance is a major restriction for the ability of taking care of family members on a regular basis. In a survey in Sweden 28 percent of those who claimed that they had a parent in need of support stated that they could not assist because of geographic distance (Malmberg and Sundström 2006).

On average, the intergenerational geographic distances are longer in Sweden compared to other European countries (Hank 2007). Still, more than eight of ten over the age of 65 who have adult children live within 50 kilometres of an adult child, and 10 percent of those live very close by, within 100 meters (Malmberg and Pettersson 2008). Further, Malmberg and Pettersson found that the trend regarding geographic proximity is not an increase in distance but rather shortening distances comparing the situations in 1992 and 2002. Moreover, it is well established that intergenerational contacts differ between socio-economic groups,



whereby people who do manual work or have low income or low education have more frequent contact with their family compared to those who do non-manual work or have high income and/or higher education (Fors and Lennartsson 2008). An important explanatory factor is that the geographic distances between generations are greater in the latter group, as mobility is generally higher among the well educated (Pettersson and Malmberg 2009). But even when distance is controlled for there is a remaining difference (Fors and Lennartsson 2008), which might be explained by the fact that people in a better socio-economic position have better resources and thus more options, for instance being able to afford to pay for care and support for their parents, and might also have a better position in negotiations with the public welfare providers (Szebehely 2006).

The civil status of parents and their adult children and the existence of grandchildren have implications for the contact between generations. Adult children have less contact with their parents as they enter cohabitation or marriage, but the frequency of contact was higher in cases of the child having offspring (Bucx, Trudie and Hagendoorn 2008). Adult children and grandchildren can serve as migration attractions for the elderly, reducing intergenerational distance, but grandparents seem even more important as migration attractions for young families, who are more migratory than the older generation (Pettersson and Malmberg 2009).

### ***Data and method***

The general trends of increased longevity, reduced fertility and postponed childbearing are extensively described in the demographic literature. In order to study how these tendencies on the aggregate level affect the composition of families we need individual data, but census or register rarely includes linkages to family members outside the household, which makes studies of multigenerational kinships impossible. Instead, in most cases intergenerational

relations are studied using surveys (see for example: Agree, Bissett and Rendall 2003, Bucx, Trudie and Hagendoorn 2008, Grundy and Henretta 2006, Hoff 2007) or on estimates based on mortality and fertility rates (see for example: Murphy and Grundy 2003, Wachter 1997). This study, however, is based on Swedish register data covering the total Swedish population. These data include information from the Multi-Generation Register (StatisticsSweden 2007), which offers a world unique possibility to link parents, children and grandchildren to the individuals in the sample.

Additionally, the Swedish registers have a very high geographical resolution with location of residence down to 100 meters. This enables the analysis of the geographic distance between individuals. Besides data on household composition, sex, education level and year of birth, all individuals are assigned geographical coordinates that allow the determinacy of geographic distance between residences. The distance between an individual and an adult child was calculated, and if the distance was less than 50km, any grandchildren were considered to be nearby grandchildren. Nearby mother and father were defined the same way. This rather generous definition of geographic nearness was chosen as a limit whereby the proximity allows for face-to-face contact on short notice at a distance possible to travel back and forth in one day (can easily be travelled by car). This definition extends beyond the most intensive care on a daily basis. In Sweden, intergenerational care is less intense compared to that in other European countries; regarding the care of both grandchildren and parents co-residence, for example, is very rare compared to other countries (Albertini, Kohli and Vogel 2007).

We have chosen the age group 55<sup>1</sup>, an age at which it has been shown likely to have both grandchildren and a living parent (Hagestad and Uhlenberg 2007). According to Matthews and Sun (2006), 38 percent of people in the age group 50-59 lived in a four-generation family in the US in 1990. In Norway 28 percent of women between 55 and 60 live in a four-generation families, and a comparative study using SHARE data shows 25 percent of people aged 55-60 in Sweden, Denmark, France and Austria in four-generation structures (Hagestad and Uhlenberg 2007). At age 55, most people are still active on the labour market. In Sweden this is also true for women, who had a labour market participation rate of 69 percent in the age group 55-59 (74 percent for men) in 2005 (Statistics Sweden 2009).

Our data consist of all 55-year-olds resident in Sweden during the period 1990-2005. This means that the 55-year-olds in 1990 were born in 1935 and the 55-year-olds in 2005 were born in 1950. The total number of individuals included in the dataset is 2,006,243. Data on these individuals included sex, education level, income, civil status, and geographic location. For these individuals, there is also information on their parents' location, year of birth and civil status. Their adult children are also linked, including data on location, year of birth, sex, civil status, education level, number of children, and age at which they first gave birth. This paper includes description and regression analysis to explore the multi-generational family structures.

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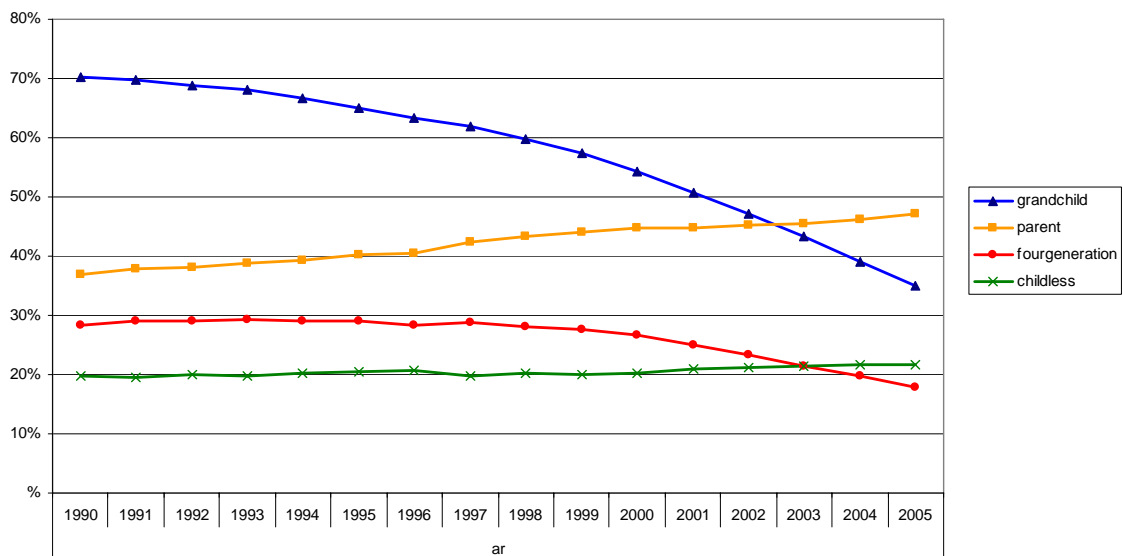
<sup>1</sup> Fortunately, our data enabled us to make the analysis on one-year age groups, in this way the period effects were not blurred by cohort effects which is the case if for instance five year age groups are used. To see if the patterns differed a lot between age groups we made separate analyses also for people aged 58 and found a similar trend of multigenerational structures as for those aged 55.

## ***Findings***

### **Trends in grandparenthood and living parents**

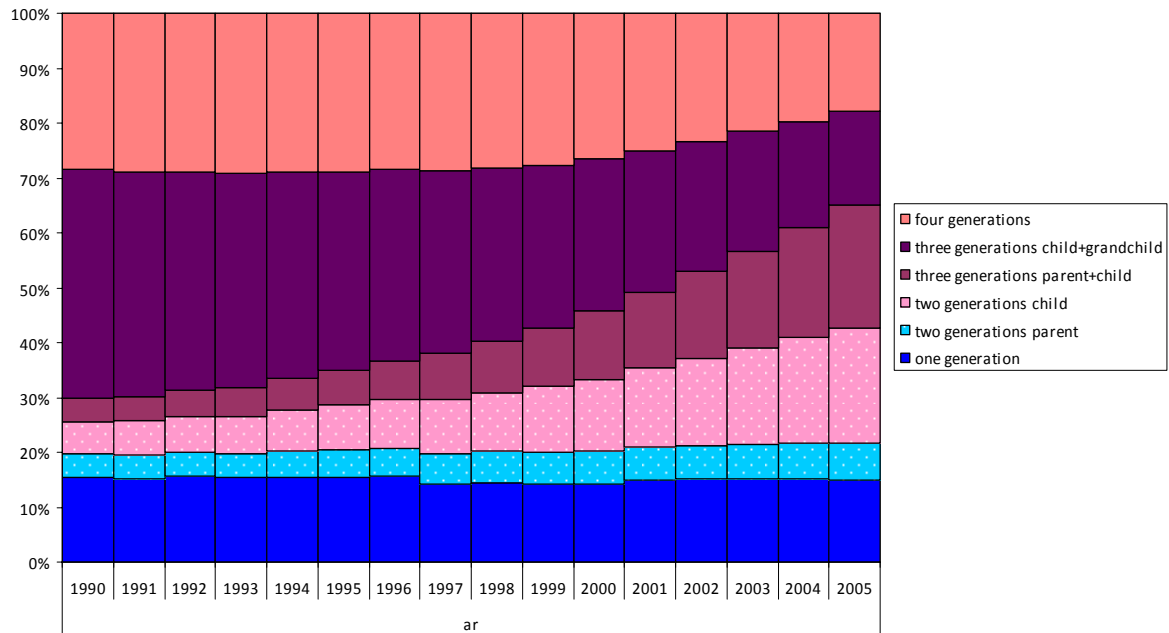
Analysing the information from the multigenerational register on 55-year-olds and their relatives, we found a rather dramatic decrease in the percentage having grandchildren: from 70 to 35 percent between 1990 and 2005 (see Figure 1). Hence, it was twice as common for a 55-year-old to have a grandchild at the beginning of this fifteen-year period compared to at its end. Theoretically, this could be related to variations in the level of childlessness, but it is worth noting that the level of childlessness among these age cohorts is quite stable, and childlessness is thereby only a very marginal explanation for this rapid decrease in the share of 55-year-olds who are experiencing grandparenthood. Rather, this trend is the result of postponement of first child-birth and increasing intergenerational spacing.

As expected, more 55-year-olds have living parents in 2005 compared to 1990. This number has increased from 37 to 47 percent during this period as a result of increased longevity. Since 2003, it is more likely for a 55-year-old to have an elderly parent than a grandchild. Altogether this means that shrinking shares of Swedish 55-year-olds live in four-generation families; since the year 2000, the share of 55-year-olds who experience grandparenthood while their parents are still alive has shrunk from a fairly steady level around 28 percent to 18 percent in 2005.



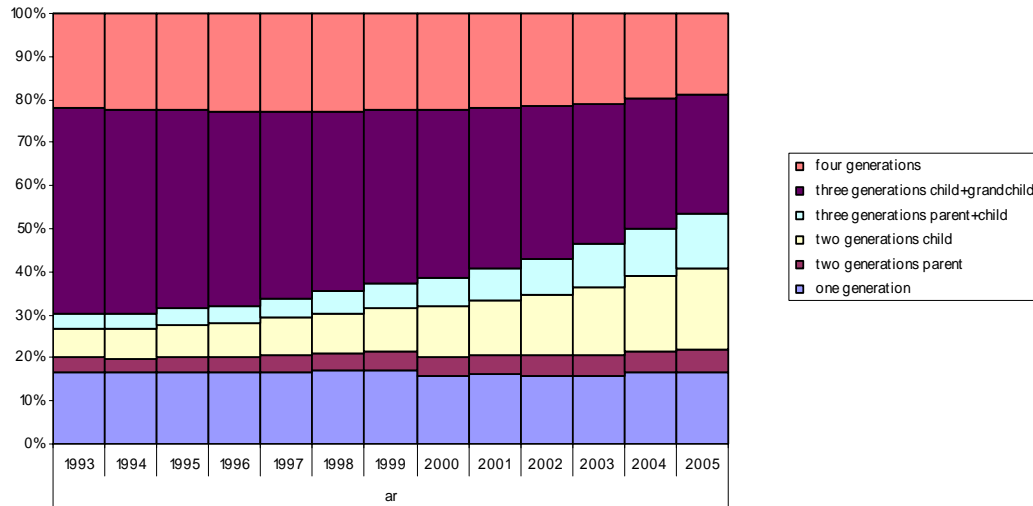
**Figure 1 Percentage of 55-year-olds with parents and with grandchildren**

In figure 2 we can see the family constellations of all 55-year-olds, and that the share of 55-year-olds who have neither parents nor children is stable at around 15 percent. The share with living parents has increased due to increasing longevity, which has resulted in more two-generation families with parent and three-generation families with parent and child. The share of 55-year-olds who are the oldest generation in a three-generation family line has decreased, as have four-generation families due to the postponement of childbirth among the children of the 55-year-olds. Since fewer 55-year-olds are grandparents, the share of two-generation families with child has increased from 6 to 21 percent. In 1990, 70 percent of the 55-year-olds were part of a family including grandchildren but by 2005, the majority of 55-year-olds live in a family consisting of two or three generations of adults and only about one-third are part of a family including a child.

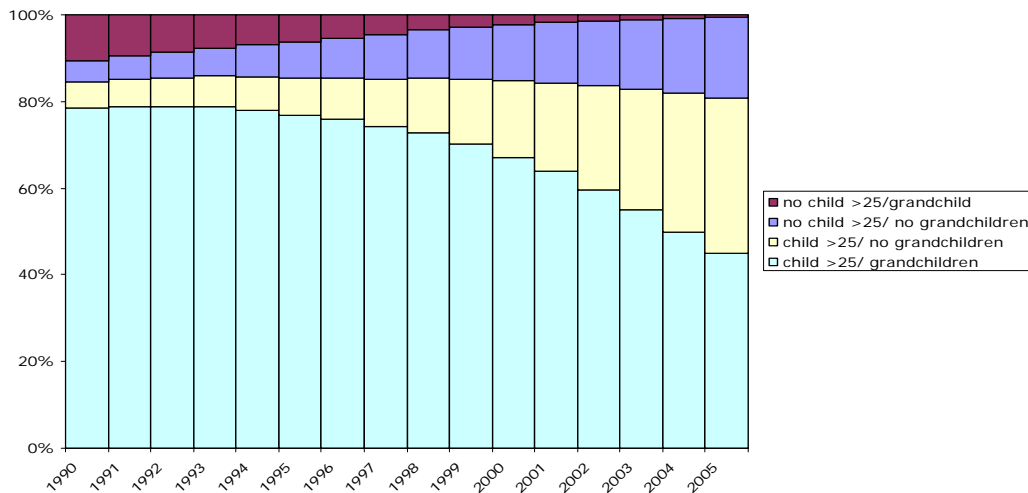


**Figure 2 Family constellations among 55-year-olds**

It could be argued that the results of this study reflect a threshold phenomenon; that the choice of age 55 is a tipping point where we see some dramatic changes that would not be as dramatic if another age group were chosen – for instance, that there is only a delay in the arrival of the grandchildren and that the decrease in grandparenthood would not be as dramatic if another age group were studied, and that being the second link in a four-generation family is more likely in an older age group. Studying the incidence of four-generation families, however, is always a balance act. In Figure 3 the family constellations of 58-year-olds are described, and as we can see, more people have become grandparents, although the likelihood of being a grandparent has decreased over time. More have lost their parents by age 58, so the share of four-generation families is smaller in this group and the tendency is similar to a decrease in multigenerational families over time. It is hence not more likely that we would find a growing number of “both-end carers” in another age group.



**Figure 3 Family constellations among 58-year-olds**



**Figure 4 Share of 55-year-olds with at least one child aged 25 with and without grandchildren**

Obviously, the decreasing number of grandparents aged 55 for the period 1990-2005 could be the result of increasing age at the birth of the first child, both for the parents now aged 55 and for their children. Analysing the register data, however, we find that the major explanation is the delay of childbirth among the children of the 55-year-olds. The share of 55-year-olds who have at least one child aged 25 or older has not changed much over the 15-year period but is instead quite steady at around 85 percent; but what has happened is that these children have delayed family formation and have no children yet. In 1990, nine of ten 55-year-olds whose eldest child was 25 years or older also had a grandchild. By 2005 this share has shrunk to 50 percent. In 1990 about 10 percent of the 55-year-olds had grandchildren although their eldest

child was not yet 25. In 2005 this group has almost disappeared. In Figure 4 it is evident that what has happened during this period is not that fewer 55-year-olds have a child older than 25, but that their children have no offspring at this time, i.e. the main explanation for the dramatic decline in grandparenthood in this age group is increasing generational spacing, not between the 55-year-olds and their children but between their children and their grandchildren. In fact, the cohort of women born in the mid 1940s was comprised of the youngest mothers on average for a century (Alm-Stenflo and Persson 2002). A complementary explanation could potentially be a decrease in family size in these cohorts, resulting in less likelihood of becoming a grandparent at age 55. The Total Cohort Fertility Rate rates were quite stable during this period, though, decreasing slightly from 2.19 for women in the cohort born in 1935 to 1.99 for women in the cohort born in 1950. Neither has there been a dramatic shift in the distribution of family size between these cohorts. Having one child is just as frequent among the cohort born in 1950 compared to 1935, but the share of women with three or more children has decreased from 33 percent in the cohort born in 1935 to 29 percent for the later cohort (Alm-Stenflo and Persson 2002).

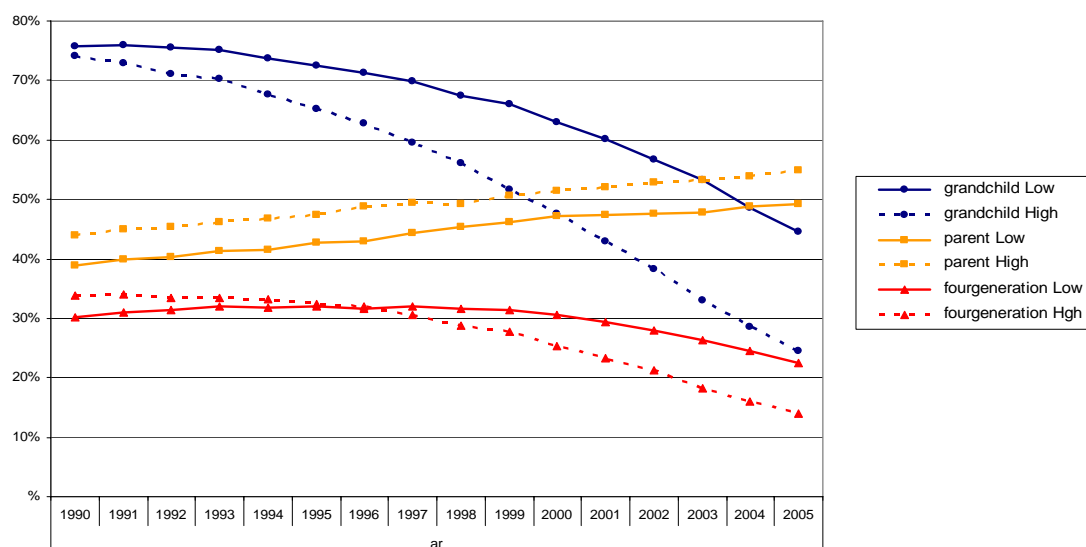
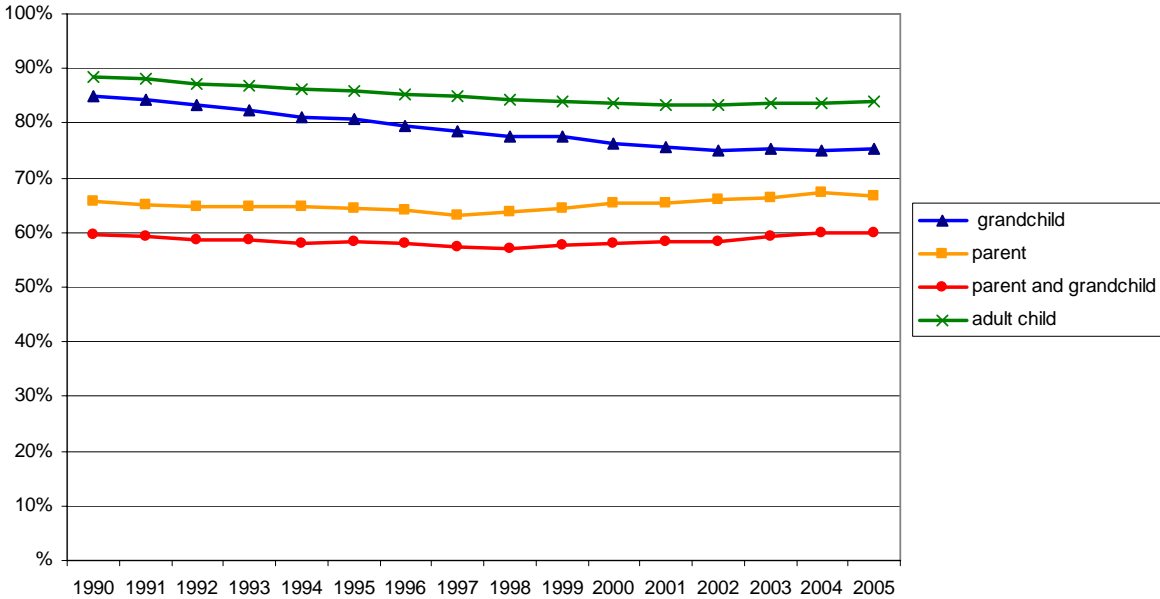


Figure 5 Percentages among high and low educated having living parents and grandchildren



Analysing the socio-economic differences in family structure (see figure 5), we used the education level of the 55-year-olds as socio-economic indicator, and found trends of increasing divergence regarding the number of people who have grandchildren at age 55. Though the share has diminished in both groups, the decline has been faster among the highly educated, due to delay of childbearing among the children of the 55-year-olds. Further, a 55-year-old with a higher education is more likely to have a living parent than one with a lower education, which is an expected outcome since we know from other studies that longevity differs between socio-economic groups (Larsson and Thorslund 2006). This difference is consistent over time and the share with parents who are still living increased slowly during this period in both groups. In sum, the share of 55-year-olds who belonged to a four-generation lineage was higher for the highly educated until 1996, and thereafter four-generation families become more common among the less educated. Intergenerational spacing, not increased longevity, is the prime driver of this development.

**Geographic proximity**



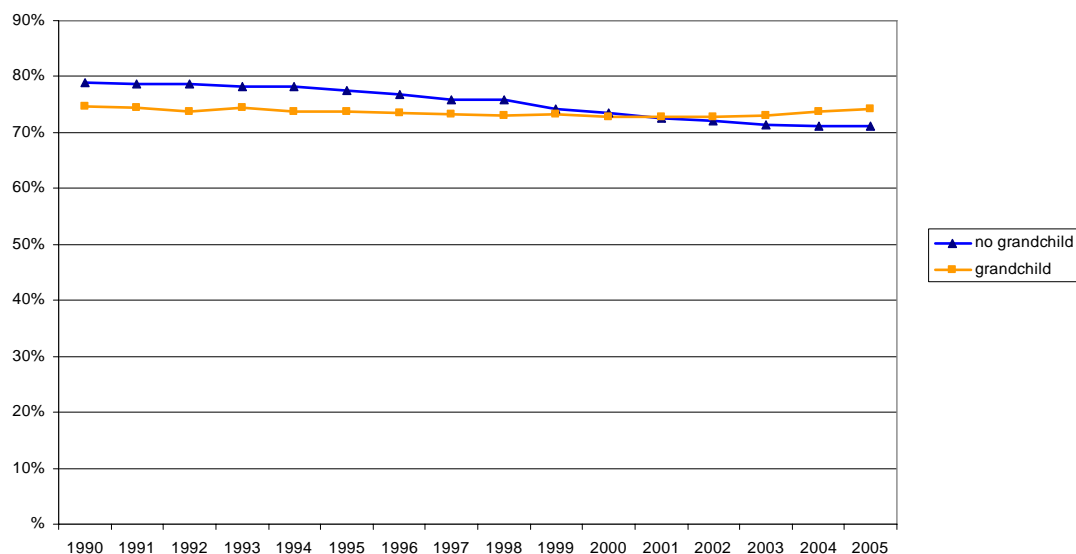
**Figure 6 Share of 55-year-olds who have their adult child and/or parent living within 50km**

Among those who have grandchildren, the majority have a grandchild within 50 km. Three of four grandparents have at least one grandchild within daily reach, while slightly below 70 percent live within 50 kilometres of their elderly parents<sup>2</sup>. Among those who have a living parent, the geographic distance has not increased. The 55-year-olds in 2005 live just as close to their parents as did 55-year-olds in 1990. Among those who have a grandchild, the share that has at least one grandchild within 50 km has decreased. This could be a result of generations living at a further distance, but might also be an effect of 55-year-olds having more grandchildren in 1990, making it more likely for one of them to live nearby. The children who are parents also tend to be slightly older and have therefore had more opportunities to move away from their parents.

The statistics above are therefore a bit misleading; if we look at the distance to the first-born child only, a slightly different picture emerges as the share of grandparents who live within 50 kilometres of their grandchildren is fairly steady while the distance to parents among adult children without their own children seems to have increased over time. When the results were analysed in a regression model, it became clear that when age is controlled for, being a parent reduces a child's distance to their 55-year-old parent.

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<sup>2</sup> The larger share with grandchildren nearby compared to those having parents nearby can be explained by the fact that you have a better chance to have at least one child nearby, since multiple children might live in different locations, while parents are often only in one location.



**Figure 7 Share of 55-year-olds who have their first-born child living within 50km**

Table 1 contains the results of a logistic regression estimating the likelihood of 55-year-olds living within 50 kilometres of their first-born child. In the analyses, we have investigated the trends of intergenerational proximity and relations between distance and a number of socio-demographic characteristics of both the 55 year old parents and their oldest child<sup>3</sup>. According to these results, the likelihood of living close to the oldest child was higher for 55-year-olds who were mothers compared to fathers and for married couples rather than singles, and lower for 55-year-olds with higher education compared to those with lower education. If their oldest child was a son, it was more likely that they lived close by compared to daughters. Grandchildren increased the likelihood of living close by and children who were single parents lived closer to their parents compared to those who were married or cohabiting. The period effect is very small yet positive, indicating that when the socio-economic and demographic characteristics of parents and children are controlled for, 55-year-olds in the later years are slightly more inclined to live close to their first-born child. Thus, our analyses do not indicate a tendency of increasing geographic distances between generations within the same family.

<sup>3</sup> If we instead of the oldest child had focused on the closest child, we would of course get a better picture of the proximity to potential care-givers and care-takers, but on the other hand we would end up with selection bias when analyzing the influence of various socio-demographic features on the distance between parents and adult children.

**Table 1 Results from logistic regression dependent variable: 1=living within 50 kilometres from first-born child**

	B	Std. Error	Beta	T	sig
Mother (0=Father)	.303	.004	5584.318	1.354	.000
Married/cohabitant (0=Single)	.302	.004	4832.146	1.352	.000
High education (0=Low education)	-.362	.005	6227.625	.696	.000
Daughter (0=Son)	-.158	.004	1602.256	.854	.000
Only child (0=Siblings)	.044	.005	71.426	1.045	.000
Childs age (continuous)	-.057	.001	12267.517	.945	.000
Grandchild (0=No grandchild)	.129	.005	817.192	1.137	.000
Child single parent (0=Child married/cohabitant)	.181	.013	195.225	1.199	.000
Child high education (0=Child low education)	-.960	.004	55437.072	.383	.000
Year (continuous)	.002	.000	18.569	1.002	.000
Constant	-1.145	.915	1.566	.318	.211

Number included in the analysis: 1,461,052

Nagelkerke R Square 0.087

-2 Log likelihood 1.606 E6

More recent cohorts of 55-year-olds are also somewhat more likely to live near their elderly mothers when other effects are controlled for. Table 2 presents the results from logistic regression estimating the propensity for 55-year-olds to live within 50km of their mothers. Sons live closer to their mothers than daughters do, as do those who are married and low educated. Fifty-five-year-olds seem to live closer to their mothers if the mother is older and if she is not married. These effects are small but are also probably highly correlated, so this is difficult to assess.

**Table 2 Results from logistic regression dependent variable: 1=living within 50 kilometres from mother**

	B	Std. Error	Beta	T	sig
Year (continuous)	.027	.001	2047.156	1.028	.000
Woman (0=Man)	-.085	.005	262.418	.918	.000
Married/cohabitant (0=Single)	.062	.006	120.675	1.064	.000
High education (0=Low education)	-1.013	.006	31666.542	.363	.000
Mother single (0=Married/cohabitant)	.021	.006	11.200	1.021	.001
Mothers age (continuous)	.013	.001	501.085	1.013	.000
Constant	-54.188	1.200	2039.981	.000	.000

Number included in the analysis: 706,646. Nagelkerke R Square 0.064. -2 Log likelihood 846867.774

## ***Summary and discussion***

Due to the trends of increasing longevity, researchers have occasionally presumed that four-generation families would be an increasing phenomenon and, as part of a so-called “beanpole” kinship structure, this would result in increasing importance for vertical intergenerational family ties. However, this empirical analysis of family structure shows that in the Swedish case the increasing intergenerational spacing is counteracting this process and, in fact, we see opposite trends. In fact, less than 20 percent of the 55-year-olds are in a family position whereby they have both grandchildren and elderly parents, and this experience has become less common in Sweden in the period 1990-2005. The results of this study imply that there is no reason to expect that both-end carers will become a more frequent situation among 55-year-olds in the near future. Thus far, the elongated intergenerational gap has affected only the most recent generation. Even if the postponing of childbearing were to be reversed in coming generations, the long intergenerational gap in the current generation would persist and thus make four-generation linkages less likely in future generations, for many decades to come. If intergenerational spacing stays long in coming generations, the average number of generations in families will decrease even more and we will see long intergenerational gaps between several generations. Due to reduced fertility rates and increased intergenerational gaps, there is no general tendency of continuous growth in the number of generations. Although the data in this study are Swedish, the tendency of postponement of family formation is a general trend throughout Europe. Being in a situation in which care is required by both an elderly parent and grandchildren at the same time will continue to be experienced by a minority, and the findings of this study offer no evidence that this would be more frequent in any other age group. Rather than one generation being caught in the middle, most families consist of two generations of healthy, independent adults and either an older fragile generation or one of young children in need of care.

The postponement of childbirth has resulted in the postponement of grandparenthood and reduced the share of both-end carers, who have grandchildren and ageing parents to attend to. But if the current trend of increasing spacing continues in the next generation and if the current trend of postponement of labour market entry and nest-leaving continues, it is more likely that a sandwich situation will become more frequent, with people in their fifties or sixties having dependent children (albeit some over 18) and elderly parents in need of care.

In order to be able to provide care for relatives, geographic distance is crucial. This study shows that the majority who have ageing parents or grandchildren have them within daily reach, which makes assistance possible. There is no dramatic change in the intergenerational proximity over the time period studied, but we can see that there is a quite large and persistent difference between people with high and low education, with the more educated living more distant from their kin. It can be predicted that a smaller proportion of elderly will have children and grandchildren living in the vicinity in the future, but the reason for this is not migration but rather a reduced number of kin who can potentially live close by. The results of this study stress the importance of demography in shaping intergenerational distance rather than migration.

This study can only describe the preconditions for intergenerational relations and not the content or quality of the kin networks; other methods are better suited to scrutinize these aspects. Although having kin is by no means a guarantee for an intensive relationship, the absence of kin is definite. One indication of strong family ties is the result that shows a higher propensity for living closer to adult children when grandchildren are present. The data used in this study could be used in further studies, however, to shed more light on the implications of

the linked lives of kin and how events like grandparenthood coincide with retirement or migration. The micro level data also allow for more detailed studies on the interaction of socio-economic differences and family structures.

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