

MULTI-GENERATIONAL HOUSEHOLDS

I just read a great post on the Silver Century Foundation website, which hosts a treasure trove of information on aging issues. I recommend investigating the well-written features.

The one I focused on was “Three Generation Households: Are They History?” by Flora Davis. The author notes that while Americans are nostalgic for an image of three-generation homes, this has not been the reality through most of our history. In colonial times, families often lived nearby one another, and unmarried adults remained at home to care for parents. Widows often took in boarders or became boarders so they were not alone. Three-generation households became more common in the Victorian era, as people lived longer and had larger families. Post-emancipation rural African American families placed great importance on keeping families together and sharing the work of farming. An influx of immigrant families also increased the number of multi-generational households as people took in relatives until they could get established.

The Depression saw some families moving in together and others splitting in search of work, or putting both parents and children in public care homes. In the latter half of the century, New Deal reforms (including Social Security) and retirement pensions transformed older adults’ ability to remain independent.

Today many millennial children are boomeranging back into their parents’ homes, weighted down with significant student debt, high rents and low incomes, reducing the likelihood that their parents will take in their grandparents. In addition, nearly 90% of older adults want to remain independent in their own homes, and assistance programs help low-income people remain at home. Home health aides are in high demand and technology is evolving to provide in-home support. Many can’t afford current senior living options.

What lies ahead? Much depends on the economy and public policy. Affluence supports independence, and current public assistance programs help many lower-income seniors. Families, many from a distance, will continue to provide most of the care for those whose circumstances fall somewhere in the middle.

I wonder if we might see more generation-skipping multi-generational homes, where young adult grandchildren move in with their grandparents. Costs and tasks can be shared, benefitting both generations without some of the parent-child stresses.

I also wonder if our growing multi-culturalism will increase awareness and adoption of family models that are common in other parts of the world but have been lost in middle-class and affluent Euro-centric American families. Many of our Latino, Chinese and South Asian neighbors have successfully maintained multi-generational family homes after immigrating to the U.S. We may also see an increase in establishment of “friend families” with non-related members, such as students and older adults together, or a small group of co-housing adults. I think multi-generational homes are a very viable model for successful aging in place.

We need to provide information and resources so that both families and non-families can negotiate effective home-sharing agreements and work through issues that arise to support the success of multi-generational homes.

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