

## **“We're a family - it makes sense to live together”: Multigenerational households in Sydney and Brisbane**

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**Abstract:** In 2011, over four million Australians lived in multigenerational households where two or more generations of related adults cohabit. This accounts for one in five Australians, with proportions higher still in the major cities. This paper reports on the findings of a survey of people who live in multigenerational households in Sydney and Brisbane. The survey provides important information about how and why these households live together. The paper concludes with a discussion of the implications of these findings in the context of structural changes in Australian society and social and cultural views about the family.

### **1. Introduction**

When considering the impact of changing household structures on Australian cities, research often focuses on the rise of lone-person and smaller households and the push by state governments to provide more smaller dwellings through urban consolidation and compact city policies. Similar processes are occurring in countries around the world (OECD, 2012). While smaller households are indeed increasing in number (ABS, 2012), there remains a diversity of household types in our cities. One of the most significant is multigenerational households, in which more than one generation of related adults live together. In 2011, one in five Australians lived in a multigenerational household (ABS, 2013), with the proportions higher still in the major cities. In Sydney, for example, approximately one-quarter of the population lives in a multigenerational household, and the growth of the population living in this household type has surpassed the growth in the city's population as a whole since the 1980s (ABS, 2013).

Despite the significance of multigenerational households in Australian and other western cities, research on this household type in western societies is a relatively recent venture, with the majority of research to date focused on cultures where such household arrangements are traditional (e.g. di Giulio & Rosina, 2007; Mehio-Sibai et al., 2009; Ting & Chui, 2002).

This paper reports on the first stage of a multi-year research project on multigenerational households in Australian cities that aims to determine the principal drivers of multigenerational living and how these affect the day-to-day lives of families in Australian cities. We present findings from a detailed analysis of customised census data and a survey of 337 multigenerational households in Sydney and Brisbane to discuss how and why people live in multigenerational households.

The paper begins with an explanation of the research methodology used for the census analysis and survey of people living in multigenerational households. The findings of the census analysis are then presented to demonstrate how people live in multigenerational households in Australian cities, followed by discussions regarding why people live in multigenerational households. In answering this question, we consider the dynamic inter-relationships between structural changes in Australian society, public policy decisions about the provision of housing and areas of family significance, and social and cultural views about the family as they appear in the contemporary living arrangements of Australian families.

### **2. Research into multigenerational households**

Most research to date on multigenerational households in western societies has focussed on the delayed home-leaving of young adults, citing it as a major factor contributing to an observed increase in the incidences of multigenerational households in many different regions of the world, including in Australia (Cherlin et al., 1997; Cobb-Clark, 2008; Gee et al., 2003). This research points to delays in entering marriage and parenthood, starting or continuing education, and delays in entering the workforce as the causes for young adults' delayed first home-leaving.

Previous Australian research, utilising the longitudinal Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia survey, has also investigated the timing of first home-leaving amongst young Australians. Pioneering work by Cobb-Clark and Ribar (2009), which covered the years 2001 to 2006, showed that the personal finance and other economic factors are major determinants of a young person's first home-leaving decision, including financial stress resulting from changes in eligibility for government support.

Another team of researchers using the same dataset found that level of education, family background and ethnicity also strongly influenced the home-leaving decisions of young adults (Flatau et al., 2007).

Delayed home-leaving by young adults, however, only partly contributes to the trend towards multigenerational cohabitation in Australia. A national empirical Australian study by Judd et al. (2010) indicates that high rates of relationship breakdowns have seen even older adults returning to live with their parents for practical, financial and emotional support. External shocks, notably the recent global financial crisis, have also played a significant role in older adults returning to live in the parental home.

In parallel, there is growing evidence of older parents moving in to reside with their adult children, both in Australia (Olsberg & Winters, 2005) and overseas (Swartz, 2009; Kaur Nijjar, 2012; Mehio-Sibai et al., 2009). Recent evidence highlights the increasing incidence of relationship breakdowns (including divorces in later life) amongst older people, with some parents moving in to live with their adult offspring for emotional and practical support and to provide caring duties for their grandchildren (Judd et al., 2010). These shifts have reconfigured the role that family plays in care giving (Swartz, 2009) in an environment where government policies encourage ageing in place for older people with low care needs (DHA, 2009).

These already complex trends are further complicated by Australia's changing cultural fabric. While chain migration continues, Australia's main sources of migrants have gradually shifted from English-speaking countries (notably the UK) to Asian nations (including China and India) since the introduction of multicultural policies in the 1970s (Burnley, 2009). New migrant sources have resulted in increased diversity and differences in our cultural and ethnic makeup, particularly in our major cities (Burnley, 2006). Many of these new migrants are expected to live in multigenerational households, with the number of applicants to the family reunion scheme, particularly for their financially non-contributing parents to migrate to Australia, continuing to increase since 2007-08 (DIC, 2008; 2010).

Research conducted by Olsberg and Winters (2005) on attitudes amongst Australians 50 years and older regarding their present and future housing situations found evidence that cultural background does influence attitudes towards multigenerational households, with people of Anglo-Celtic heritage less likely to speak favourably about the option of living with their children than people with other cultural backgrounds. Furthermore, international research indicates that young adults' timing of first home-leaving differs both in motivation and degree of acceptance according to their cultural backgrounds, notably that young adults from backgrounds that traditionally practiced multigenerational cohabitation – such as Chinese (e.g. Chui 2008) or Japanese (e.g. Izuhara, 2010) – tend to leave home at an older age and for partnership, whereas young adults of Anglo-Celtic backgrounds tended to leave home earlier and for independence (Gee et al., 2003).

While changes in the acceptance of multigenerational living are greatly influenced by the changing cultural makeup of Australia's cities, available evidence nonetheless indicates that this is not the sole reason for this change. Flatau et al. (2007), for example, found that even after controlling for education, family background and ethnicity there has been a gradual increase in the age of offspring when they first leave the parental home in Australia. This shift is particularly important amongst young adults now aged in their late twenties and early thirties (Flatau et al., 2007). They also suggest that broader changes in norms and values have influenced these changed household outcomes.

### **3. Methodology**

The research employed a mixed method approach and reports on the first two stages of this research – census analysis and a questionnaire survey.

#### **3.1. Census analysis**

Customised cross-tabulations from the seven most-recent Australian Census of Population and Housing, and pertaining specifically to multigenerational households, were purchased from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS). This was necessary as there is as yet any Australian dataset designed specifically to collect information on multigenerational households nor the reasons why these families co-reside. These cross-tabulations thus facilitated a time-series analysis of the socio-demographic and housing characteristics of multigenerational households in Australia between 1981 and 2011. Specifically, cross-tabulations were performed at the personal as well as at the household levels, including birthplace (by region), household's size (number of residents), dwelling type and tenure. Data was purchased geographically for Australia as a whole and for the Sydney and Brisbane greater metropolitan areas (equivalent to the 2006 definition of Statistical Division). A time-series analysis of this data is presented in

this paper to highlight how the socio-demographic and housing circumstances of multigenerational households in the two cities have changed over the 30-year period.

The greater metropolitan areas of Sydney and Brisbane were identified as two contrasting case studies in the Australian context following extensive census analysis. As Australia's most populous city, Sydney has been the traditional receiving city of many immigrants and as such has an ethnically diverse population. Since the early 1980s, it also has the highest proportion of its population living in multigenerational households amongst all major Australian cities. Further, the increase in the number of people living in multigenerational households in Sydney (51.4% during 1981-2011) also far exceeded the overall population growth of the city over the same period (38.2%). In contrast, Brisbane had the most rapid proportional increase in the number of multigenerational household residents between 1981 and 2011 in Australia (71.5%), partly as a result of its rapid population growth (92.2%) following increased settlement from overseas and interstate migrants (OESR, 2011), though its ethnic composition differs to that of Sydney's. Moreover, Sydney and Brisbane also make contrasting case studies as they have different housing market conditions so that each population has distinctive housing demands and constraints (Yates & Gabriel, 2006).

The definition of multigenerational households used in these Census cross-tabulations followed concession by Cohen and Casper (2002, p.1) that "conceptually, standard practices for identifying multigenerational living arrangements and their implications remain elusive". This is partly because of the variation in living arrangements multigenerational households live under: couple families with adult children in the household and three-generation households comprising of grandparents are but two examples. As such, we defined multigenerational households as any household where more than one generation of related adults co-reside in the same dwelling, where the oldest of the youngest generation – be they the children or grandchildren – is 18 years or older. While this definition still excludes notable multigenerational household forms – e.g. three-generation households where the oldest grandchild is still to turn 18 – it represents the most comprehensive collection of socio-demographic and housing data of these households in Australia.

### **3.2. Questionnaire survey**

To complement the census analysis and to explore reasons why multigenerational households co-reside, a questionnaire survey was designed and conducted via the University of New South Wales online survey portal. Additionally, this survey also collected detailed information on the household composition, resident characteristics, and the experiences of multigenerational cohabitation amongst Australian families. As such, it comprised three main sections, each focussing on distinct aspects of multigenerational households in Australia: (1) the dwelling in which multigenerational households reside; (2) the reasons why these multigenerational households co-reside and the impacts this living arrangement have on their household, and (3) individuals' housing histories (including whether any members had previously moved out but returned, i.e. boomeranged), personal thoughts on living in a multigenerational household, and the likelihood of this living arrangement changing in the foreseeable future. More than one respondent from each household were encouraged to complete the third section.

The survey commenced in August 2012, was available in four languages (English, Arabic, simplified Chinese and Spanish) and was open to all Australians who live in a multigenerational household, including couple family households with at least one child aged 15-18 who earned more than \$460 per week pre-tax (the poverty line for a single person in the workforce in the September quarter of 2011; MIAESR, 2012) to account for financially independent offspring who could afford independent living but chose to stay in the parental home. The survey concluded at the end of July 2013, having received 586 responses. The survey was promoted mainly in Sydney and Brisbane through a variety of means in print, on online forums and via social media; some of these methods also reached a wider audience than the Sydney and Brisbane population. Overall, 84.7% of responses (431 responses) received were from Sydney and Brisbane. For the purpose of this paper, the 78 responses from outside of Sydney and Brisbane and invalid responses (households that, according to our definition, were not multigenerational) have been excluded from the analysis to minimise geographical bias, resulting in a total of 337 valid responses.

The survey results are slightly biased towards households with tertiary students who have yet to leave home due to the use of university communication portals as a means of recruitment. The cultural and household makeup of our respondents, as well as their dwelling and tenure profiles, however, represent relatively close matches to our census analysis.

Survey results were analysed both quantitatively and qualitatively. Pre-coded questions were analysed using frequency tables and cross-tabulations. These tables showcased the makeup of multigenerational households in Sydney and Brisbane by geography, ethnicity, household size, dwelling type, and tenure. In addition to these pre-coded questions, there were three main open-ended questions in which respondents could comment on the reasons why they live in a multigenerational household as well as what they liked and disliked about this living arrangement. These open-ended questions were post-coded and analysed thematically, with a consideration of both structural constraints and the agency of individuals and families.

## 4. Findings

### 4.1. Australian multigenerational households through time

In 2011, 4.3 million people lived in 1.2 million multigenerational households in Australia (ABS, 2013). Sydney had the largest concentration of people living in multigenerational households in Australia, with 1.1 million residents living in nearly 300,000 multigenerational households, equating 24.5% of all Sydney residents. One-fifth (19.5%) of Brisbane's population lived in multigenerational households in 2011, a proportion more similar to the Australian average (19.7%).

Since 1981, the number of people living in multigenerational households increased by 1.2 million Australia-wide, an increase of 40.9%. While this is slightly lower when compared to Australia's overall population growth over the same period (49.1%), there are notable geographic differences in the concentration and increase of multigenerational household residents throughout the country. In Sydney, the number of multigenerational household residents increased by 51.4% (367,776 people), significantly higher than its overall population increase (38.2%). While the increase in absolute number is more modest in Brisbane (160,580 people), the proportional increase was more significant (71.5%), reflecting the city's rapid population growth over the same period (92.2%). When expressed as a proportion of the total population, around one-fifth of Australians lived in multigenerational households at any one time between 1981 and 2011, peaking at 21.4% in 1991. This trend is also observed in Brisbane, while the proportion of Sydneysiders that lived in multigenerational households remained consistently high (see Table 1).

**Table 1: Summary demographic statistics of multigenerational households in Australia, Sydney and Brisbane 1981-2011**

	1981	1986	1991	1996	2001	2006	2011
<b>Number of persons living in multigenerational households</b>							
Australia	3,035,089	3,294,343	3,602,088	3,482,411	3,718,726	3,851,695	4,277,605
Sydney	715,444	790,032	880,359	897,096	957,667	973,618	1,083,220
Brisbane	224,724	251,204	297,660	292,329	319,369	340,970	385,304
<b>Number of multigenerational households</b>							
Australia	757,042	852,921	953,938	958,618	1,026,908	1,073,849	1,188,799
Sydney	180,035	204,162	228,863	240,789	257,634	265,066	293,270
Brisbane	56,280	65,280	78,417	80,716	88,510	94,490	106,097
<b>Multigenerational household residents as % of total population</b>							
Australia	20.8%	21.1%	21.4%	19.5%	19.6%	19.2%	19.7%
Sydney	22.3%	23.5%	24.9%	24.0%	24.0%	23.5%	24.5%
Brisbane	21.8%	21.3%	22.3%	19.9%	19.9%	19.1%	19.5%
<b>Multigenerational households as % of total households<sup>1</sup></b>							
Australia		16.2%	16.3%	13.4%	14.5%	14.1%	14.5%
Sydney		17.8%	18.7%	16.9%	17.9%	17.4%	18.3%
Brisbane		16.4%	17.1%	14.1%	14.2%	13.6%	13.9%
<b>Average multigenerational household size</b>							
Australia	4.0	3.9	3.8	3.6	3.6	3.6	3.6
Sydney	4.0	3.9	3.8	3.7	3.7	3.7	3.7
Brisbane	4.0	3.8	3.8	3.6	3.6	3.6	3.6

Note <sup>1</sup>: Total household counts not available for 1981.

Source: ABS, 1988; 1993; 1997; 2002; 2008; 2013

There were also 431,757 more multigenerational households in 2011 than 1981 Australia-wide, equivalent to a 57.0% increase. The proportional increases in the number of multigenerational households were elevated in greater metropolitan areas, most notably in Sydney (62.9%) and Brisbane (88.5%). When expressed as a proportion of all households, however, the prominence of multigenerational households in Australia has declined since 1986, though once again Sydney was a notable exception where its proportion remained relatively high. With a more rapid increase in the number of multigenerational households than residents, the average multigenerational household size in Australia has decreased, from 4.0 in 1981 down to 3.6 in 2011 (see Table 1).

While the size of multigenerational households has gradually declined across Australia since 1981, these households were still far more likely to live in separate houses (88.6%) in 2011 than compared to other households (72.4%). In contrast, other households were twice as likely to live in semi-detached properties, and more than three times as likely to live in higher density apartment blocks. Multigenerational households were also more likely owner-occupiers than other households and less likely renters. Furthermore, multigenerational households were more likely to own their homes outright than other households (see Table 2). As our survey responses show, this is partly because many multigenerational households have lived in their family home for extended periods, where children had grown up but yet to leave home (see Table 8).

**Table 2: Housing characteristics of multigenerational households, Australia, 2011**

	Multigenerational households	Other households
<b>Dwelling structure</b>		
Separate house	88.6%	72.4%
Semi-detached	6.2%	10.3%
Apartment in block 3 storey or lower	3.5%	11.0%
Apartment in block 4 storey or higher	1.3%	4.3%
Other dwelling	0.3%	1.6%
Not stated	0.0%	0.4%
<b>Tenure</b>		
Fully owned	37.6%	29.4%
Being purchased	40.8%	32.4%
Rented	19.0%	30.7%
Other tenure type	0.9%	0.9%
Not stated	1.6%	6.7%

Note: For statistics on Sydney and Brisbane greater metropolitan areas, refer to Liu et al. (forthcoming).

Note: % expressed as proportion by household type

Source: ABS, 2011; 2013

Gee et al. (2003) noted that, in the Canadian context, ethnic backgrounds play a significant role in the timing and reasons of young people's first home-leaving. As early literature pointed to delayed first home-leaving being a major factor in an increase in the incidences of multigenerational households, ethnicity is also a factor influencing the propensity towards multigenerational cohabitation. While in 2011 the majority of multigenerational household residents in Australia were born in Oceania (74.1%), this proportion has gradually declined since 1981 (78.6%), so that there are more multigenerational household residents having been born elsewhere. This is especially notable for residents born in regions that represent the more recent migrant groups to Australia (e.g. South-East Asia and North Africa), also regions where multigenerational cohabitation is more conventional (Chui, 2008; Mehio-Sibai et al., 2009). When expressed as a proportion of all residents born in the same region, more than one-third of people born in North Africa and the Middle East lived in multigenerational households in 2011 (34.9%), while there were also elevated proportions of people born in South-East Asia (28.4%) and Southern and Eastern Europe (28.2%) living in multigenerational households (see Table 3). These proportions were even higher in Sydney, with two-fifths of people born in North Africa and the Middle East living in multigenerational households (39.7%), while in Brisbane more than one-quarter of people born in Sub-Saharan Africa (25.6%) or the Americas (25.3%) lived in multigenerational households in 2011.

**Table 3: Region of birth of multigenerational household residents, Australia, 2006-2011**

	% of all multigenerational households		% of total population born in region	
	2006	2011	2006	2011
Oceania & Antarctica	73.5%	74.1%	19.4%	20.3%
North-West Europe	5.6%	5.3%	15.8%	15.7%
Southern & Eastern Europe	5.7%	4.5%	30.3%	28.2%
North Africa & the Middle East	2.2%	2.5%	34.5%	34.9%
Sub-Saharan Africa	1.2%	1.5%	23.3%	23.6%
South-East Asia	4.3%	4.7%	29.7%	28.4%
North-East Asia	2.5%	2.8%	24.8%	22.2%
Southern & Central Asia	1.6%	2.0%	22.4%	17.3%
Americas	1.0%	1.0%	20.8%	18.2%

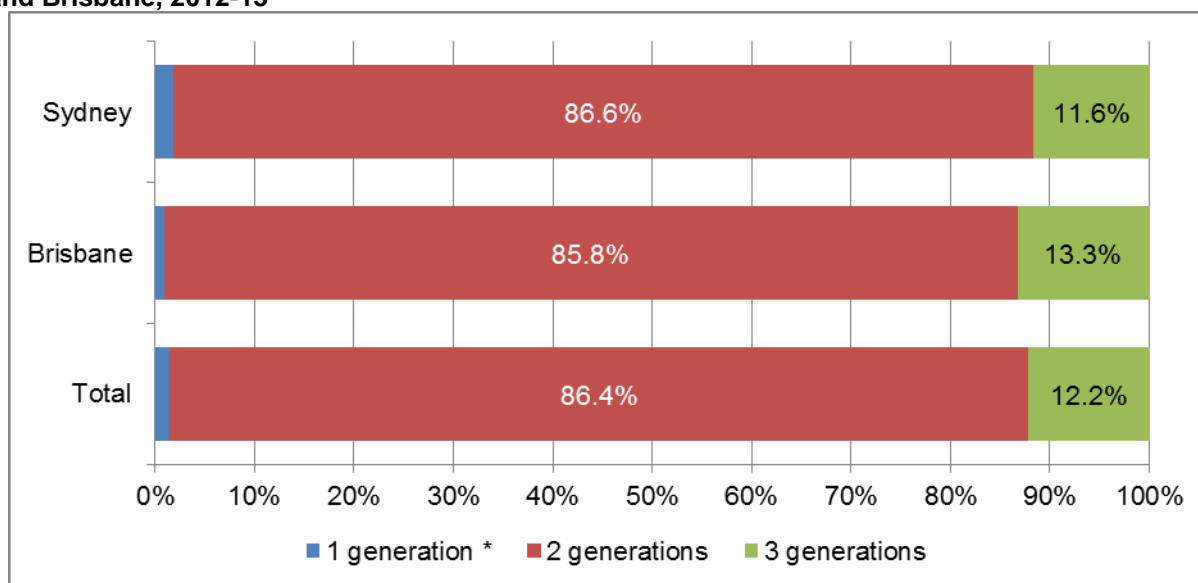
Note: For statistics on Sydney and Brisbane greater metropolitan areas, refer to Liu et al. (forthcoming).  
 Source: ABS, 2013

**4.2. How do these households live together?**

This section provides an indication of how multigenerational households in Sydney and Brisbane live together, in terms of their household size, dwelling structure, tenure, and length of residence in their current home.

The majority (86.4%) of our survey respondents from Sydney and Brisbane lived in multigenerational households that comprised two generations of adults (see Figure 1). A large proportion of these households comprised middle-aged couples co-residing with their adult children, many of whom are students attending university or those who have recently completed studies and are looking for employment, reflecting university communication portals as one of our recruitment avenues. This observation is also reflected in the reasons why these multigenerational households live together (see Table 8).

**Figure 1: Number of adult generations living together in multigenerational households, Sydney and Brisbane, 2012-13**



Note \*: These are couple or single-parent households with at least one child aged 15-18 years who has a weekly pre-tax income above the single person poverty line at the September quarter 2011 level (MIAESR, 2012).

Our survey respondents reside in multigenerational households that, on average, are larger than compared to those reported in the census analysis. Households with five or more residents comprised

almost one-third of all multigenerational households in Sydney (marginally less in Brisbane). In contrast, small, two-person multigenerational households was the least common, comprising just over one-tenth of multigenerational households in Sydney (10.3%), and one-seventh in Brisbane (Table 4).

**Table 4: Number of usual residents in multigenerational households, Sydney and Brisbane, 2012-13**

	Sydney		Brisbane		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
<b>2 residents</b>	23	10.3%	16	14.2%	39	11.6%
<b>3 residents</b>	69	30.8%	32	28.3%	101	30.0%
<b>4 residents</b>	63	28.1%	32	28.3%	95	28.2%
<b>5 residents or more</b>	69	30.8%	33	29.2%	102	30.3%
<b>Total households</b>	224	100.0%	113	100.0%	337	100.0%
<b>Average household size</b>	4.0		3.9		3.9	

With larger household size, the majority of multigenerational households lived in larger dwellings. Almost half lived in dwellings with four bedrooms or more (48.5%), with a higher proportion of these households found in Brisbane (50.9%) than in Sydney (47.3%). Very few multigenerational households lived in small dwellings with two or fewer bedrooms (13.2%), though this was more common in Sydney (16.2%) than in Brisbane (7.1%). With relatively larger household size and living in larger dwellings, most of these multigenerational household dwellings have two bathrooms or fewer (72.8%), with around one-quarter having three or more bathrooms (27.2%). In terms of living spaces (excluding utilities like kitchens and laundries), most of these households share two or fewer living spaces (81.7%) and a few have more (18.3%). Around one-tenth of our respondents have a granny flat built on their lot (11.7%; see Table 5).

**Table 5: Dwelling size of multigenerational households, Sydney and Brisbane, 2012-13**

	Sydney		Brisbane		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
<b>Number of bedrooms</b>						
<b>2 or fewer</b>	36	16.1%	8	7.1%	44	13.1%
<b>3</b>	81	36.2%	47	41.6%	128	38.0%
<b>4 or more</b>	105	46.9%	57	50.4%	162	48.1%
<b>Number of bathrooms</b>						
<b>2 or fewer</b>	158	70.5%	85	75.2%	243	72.1%
<b>3 or more</b>	64	28.6%	27	23.9%	91	27.0%
<b>Number of living spaces</b>						
<b>2 or fewer</b>	183	81.7%	90	79.6%	273	81.0%
<b>3 or more</b>	39	17.4%	22	19.5%	61	18.1%
<b>Number of granny flats</b>						
<b>1</b>	27	12.1%	12	10.6%	39	11.6%
<b>Did not answer</b>	2	0.9%	1	0.9%	3	0.9%
<b>Total households</b>	224	100.0%	113	100.0%	337	100.0%

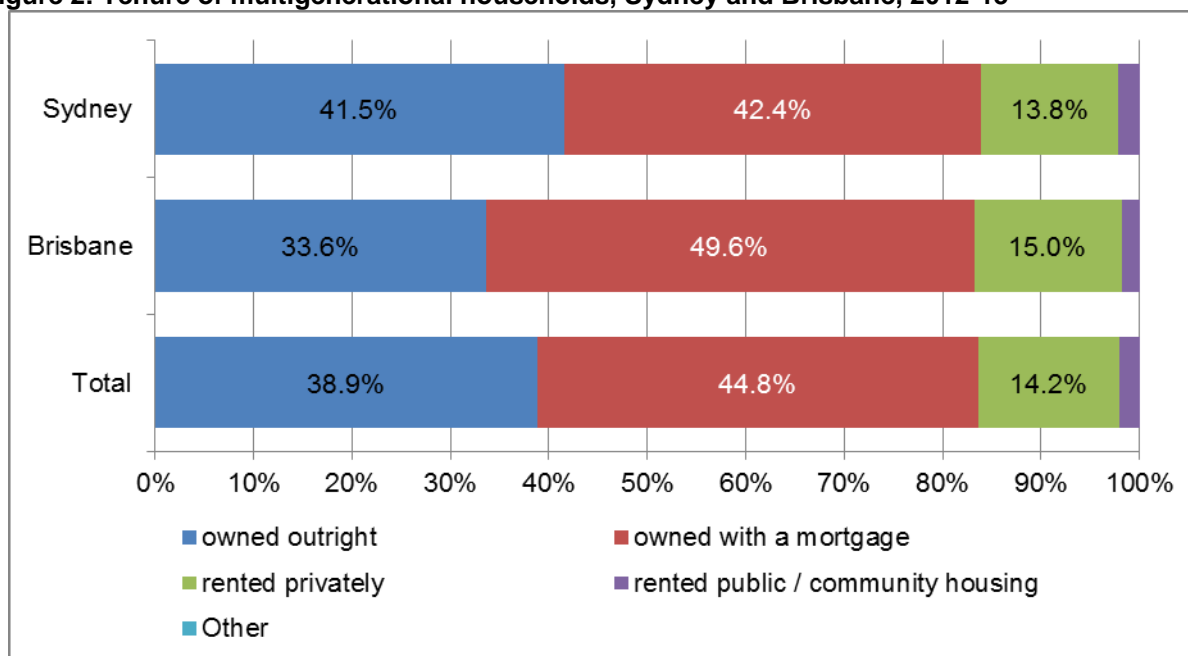
Similar to our census analysis, the majority of our survey respondents lived in low density housing. Detached house was the most common dwelling structure amongst multigenerational households, with a higher proportion in Brisbane living in detached houses compared to Sydney. Residence in a granny flat was relatively less common (8.0%), even less so was living in separate dwellings (detached houses or duplexes) on adjoining lots (0.9%). Overall, four-fifths of our respondents lived in low density housing on the same or adjacent lot. One-seventh (15.1%) lived in apartment units, a proportion that was higher in Sydney (18.3%) than in Brisbane (8.8%). Living in adjoining apartments (0.3%) or separate apartments in the same block (1.5%) were also less common options (see Table 6).

**Table 6: Dwelling structure of multigenerational households, Sydney and Brisbane, 2012-13**

Dwelling structure	Sydney		Brisbane		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
in the same detached house (without granny flat)	147	65.6%	90	79.6%	237	70.3%
in the same detached house (with a granny flat)	18	8.0%	9	8.0%	27	8.0%
in the same semi-detached dwelling	11	4.9%	1	0.9%	12	3.6%
in 2 detached houses on adjacent lots	1	0.4%	1	0.9%	2	0.6%
in 2 adjoining townhouses or duplexes on the same lot	1	0.4%	0	0.0%	1	0.3%
in 2 adjoining townhouses or duplexes on adjoining lots	1	0.4%	0	0.0%	1	0.3%
in the same flat, unit or apartment	41	18.3%	10	8.8%	51	15.1%
in 2 adjoining units/apartments	0	0.0%	1	0.9%	1	0.3%
in separate units/apartments within the same block	4	1.8%	1	0.9%	5	1.5%
<b>Total households</b>	<b>224</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>113</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>337</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

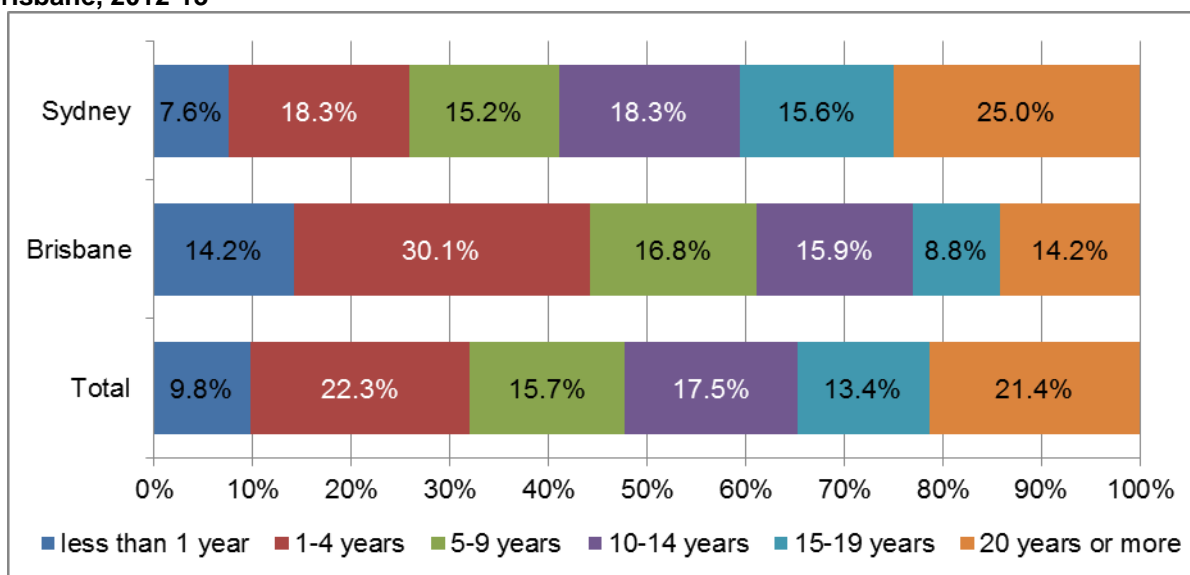
Reflecting census analysis findings, most multigenerational households in Sydney and Brisbane lived in owner-occupied dwellings, with more owned with mortgage (44.8%) than owned outright (38.9%). Unlike in Brisbane, the proportion of multigenerational households in Sydney that own their home outright is only marginally lower than those owned with mortgage. This is perhaps due to a higher proportion of these households having lived in their current dwelling for extensive periods compared to those in Brisbane (see Figure 3). and therefore have had the opportunity to (1) purchase their properties when homeownership was at a more affordable and attainable level, and/or (2) have had a longer timeframe to repay their mortgages. Private and social rentals were significantly less common tenures for multigenerational households (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2: Tenure of multigenerational households, Sydney and Brisbane, 2012-13**





**Figure 3: Multigenerational households' length of residence in current dwelling, Sydney and Brisbane, 2012-13**



### 4.3. Why live together?

This section presents evidence on why multigenerational households in Sydney and Brisbane live together. For most of these households, the decisions that led them to live in a multigenerational setting were complex, representing two, three, sometimes even five clear reasons, with just two-fifths of all respondents (40.7%) nominating one single reason (see Table 7). There was a slightly higher proportion of Sydney respondents that nominated a sole reason (43.8%) than in Brisbane (34.5%). This reflects the stronger affordability constraints in Sydney, with many of these Sydney respondents nominating finance as the reason for their multigenerational setting, though a higher proportion of Brisbane respondents said that finance was a driver in them entering multigenerational living arrangements.

**Table 7: Number of reasons given for living in a multigenerational household, Sydney and Brisbane, 2012-13**

Number of reasons given	Sydney		Brisbane		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
1	98	43.8%	39	34.5%	137	40.7%
2	74	33.0%	48	42.5%	122	36.2%
3	20	8.9%	15	13.3%	35	10.4%
4	4	1.8%	3	2.7%	7	2.1%
5	1	0.4%	1	0.9%	2	0.6%
Did not answer	27	12.1%	7	6.2%	34	10.1%
<b>Total households</b>	<b>224</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>113</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>337</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

Table 8 lists the 10 most common reasons given by respondents regarding their decision to live in a multigenerational household. While some of these reasons are undoubtedly related, they were post-coded to reflect the open ended responses of our respondents. For example, while 'care arrangement & support' and 'older (grand)parents moving in' may look to have significant crossovers, and indeed in most cases 'older (grand)parents moving in' was a solution to simplifying care arrangements, these were not always the case. Likewise, 'adult children yet to leave home' may result from 'starting/continuing education' though only in some cases, while 'starting/continuing education' also resulted in 'older (grand)parents moving in' to either provide care and support and/or to help ease financial burdens.

Of the 10 most common reasons, more than half of our respondents lived together for financial reasons (55.1%). More than one-quarter lived together for care arrangement and support (27.7%), while one-fifth of resulted from adult children delaying their first home-leaving (20.8%). Overall, cultural reasons were not a common cause that led to multigenerational cohabitation (7.6%), nor adult children

boomeranging (5.3%) and relationship breakdowns (4.3%). There were notable regional differences, with a higher proportion of families living together for financial reasons noticed in Brisbane (66.0%) than in Sydney (49.2%), while it was more common for adult children to delay their first home-leaving in Sydney than in Brisbane. Cultural background was also a more influential factor in Sydney (10.2%) than in Brisbane (2.8%).

**Table 8: Reasons for Living in a multigenerational households, Sydney and Brisbane, 2012-13**

Reasons for living together (multiple responses)	Sydney		Brisbane		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
<b>Financial</b>	97	49.2%	70	66.0%	167	55.1%
<b>Care arrangement &amp; support</b>	48	24.4%	36	34.0%	84	27.7%
<b>Adult children yet to leave home</b>	46	23.4%	17	16.0%	63	20.8%
<b>Starting/continuing education</b>	29	14.7%	16	15.1%	45	14.9%
<b>Older (grand)parents moving in</b>	27	13.7%	12	11.3%	39	12.9%
<b>"We're a family"</b>	23	11.7%	9	8.5%	32	10.6%
<b>Convenience/practicality</b>	20	10.2%	11	10.4%	31	10.2%
<b>Cultural</b>	20	10.2%	3	2.8%	23	7.6%
<b>Adult children boomeranged</b>	6	3.0%	10	9.4%	16	5.3%
<b>Relationship breakdown</b>	3	1.5%	10	9.4%	13	4.3%
<b>Other</b>	8	4.1%	2	1.9%	10	3.3%
<b>Total responses</b>	327		196		523	
<b>Total respondents *</b>	197	100.0%	106	100.0%	303	100.0%

Note: exclude respondents who did not answer this question

#### **4.4. Understanding why**

Our survey findings suggest that in order to understand why people live in multigenerational households, we need to understand both the structural constraints that individuals and families operate within (e.g. income, housing costs, importance of higher education when entering the workforce) and the agency of individuals within these households (e.g. the choices they make for the purposes of support, practicality and strong family bonds).

The two (structure and agency) are closely related. International research has shown that changes in specific structural factors do not just reflect, but actively precipitate, subsequent changes in social actions and expectations. Mitchell and Lovegreen (2009) indicate that in Canada the shift towards delayed home-leaving is largely the result of structural factors (changed economic conditions) and cultural diversity, both of which have influenced broader societal expectations. Moreover, reporting research on demographic change in Europe, Harper (2006, p.165) argues that "the knowledge of demographic ageing is itself impacting on social, economic and political decisions [taken by] both national and international institutions, and individuals themselves". That knowledge about what happens in ageing societies can impact on a number of life transitions, including the timing of first home-leaving, first marriage and first childbirth.

On the one hand, many survey respondents indicated that they were responding to structural constraints in Australian society, where the most common can be broadly categorised as 'financial'. Within this category, multiple structural issues were raised, including housing affordability constraints, the desire (or in some cases, obligation) to support adult children through higher education, support for family members in casual, part-time or insecure employment, and providing practical care and support to family members:

*"My mother in-law is divorced and she has been a house wife all her life, so can't support herself financially."*

*"Children not working or not earning enough to move out"*

*"My daughter, her partner and two children have been unable to secure a suitable rental property."*

*"My two oldest adult children cannot afford to move out of home. My oldest has a university degree but works in retail part time and cannot find full time work. My second child has worked but could not afford to move out and now is a full time student again. When my mother's health is bad ... she has had to live with us on and off."*

*"I can't afford to rent in areas that provide reliable access to the CBD. Areas I possibly could afford are too far for daily commuting and are poorly serviced by public transport."*

We also note evidence of public policy decisions about the provision of housing, higher education, and child, aged and mental health care, with families taking on support roles in terms of providing affordable housing, financial support for higher degree students and child, aged and mental health care that in other times may have been provided by the state:

*"I am divorced and studying full time. My father assists me with baby sitting and picking up the kids from school, he also helps to pay my mortgage."*

*"Sydney very expensive to rent other than on the outskirts which means family is fragmented and unable to offer support. First born son returned at 28 to be able to afford to go to uni, first born daughter has always lived with us (now a new mum herself ...). Second born daughter is still finding her feet, has had significant mental health issues and is not yet financially independent."*

Also evident in the survey responses are peoples' expectations about the role of the family:

*"My mother did not have enough savings or pension to live alone. Culturally, having her live by herself was unacceptable to me."*

*"The main reason is we cannot live without each other. We are bonded strongly to each other as in family."*

*"Family love, support, tradition, easier to care for family members in need."*

*"We're a family - it makes sense to live together."*

The implications in some responses that cultural factors were underlying these expectations will be explored further in the next stage of the research.

In regards to both the practical and emotional support shared between family members in multigenerational households, we found that this support often appeared to flow from parents to their adult children:

*"My eldest daughter is working part-time and going to university. My youngest daughter is on a low income as she is doing a traineeship. Both won't leave home. I may have to leave first."*

*"Grandkids have opportunity to grow with grandparents & their influence in their life time. Grandparents like to interact with grandkids."*

However, this was not always the case. Sometimes the younger generation was assisting the older generation:

*"Relationship break up and helping mother with money."*

*"[My] partner's mum had been living with another son for 15 years and [she] decided it was time to give him some space."*

Sometimes there was evidence of a 'sandwich generation' (Grundy & Henretta, 2006), where the middle generation was providing support to both the younger and older generations:

*"My mother and I live in the same house because I am still a student. My grandmother lives with us because she doesn't like living alone."*

This is an important observation because most Australian literature has focused on 'downward' economic intergenerational transfers (Cobb-Clark & Ribar, 2009; Olsberg & Winters, 2005), where assets and other quantifiable aspects of these dependencies are transferred from the parents to their offspring without reciprocation. In contrast, these findings support international research that has questioned this understanding of intergenerational dependencies, especially where the terms 'downward' and 'transfer' imply the relationship is unidirectional. For example, Vicente and Sousa (2009, p.35) argued that the multigenerational household can be "a setting which provides opportunities for mutual help and support". They also called for intergenerational dependencies to be examined as intergenerational exchanges. Katz and Lowenstein (2010) argued that there needs increased recognition of intergenerational or familial reciprocity.

## 5. Conclusion

Over four million people currently live in a multigenerational household in Australia, with an average household size of 3.6 residents. Multigenerational households are characteristically different to most other household types, with (on average) older residents, larger household size, and more likely to reside in detached dwellings. This observation is supported by census and survey evidence.

In answering the question of why people live in multigenerational households, the most common responses were financial reasons, providing care for family members, and supporting adult children who had not yet left the parental home. Closer analysis of the open-ended survey responses, however,

demonstrates that reasons for living in multigenerational households were often complex and involved dynamic inter-relationships between structural changes in Australian society, public policy decisions about the provision of housing and areas of family significance and social and cultural views about the family.

This finding has important implications for research into the sociology of the family. Research into this field is now more likely to speak of the 'sociology of families' or the 'sociology of intimacy' (therefore, the complexity and diversity of families) rather than of 'the family' in a homogeneous, singular manner. Such changes are not simply semantic but reflect a trend in the discipline away from consideration of the family as an institution and towards a focus on reflexivity and "the open-endedness of intimate relations" (Gilding, 2010, p.757). Analysts often have conflicting views; conservative theorists (e.g. Popenoe, 1993) have spoken of the decline of the family as a social institution while critical theorists (e.g. Allan 2008) have welcomed the recognition of the diversity and flexibility of these intimate relationships. Both groups of theorists, however, recognise and prioritise the importance of agency in shaping family configurations and living arrangements (Gilding, 2010). This shift has been critical for the recent development of family studies, especially for enabling an increased recognition of the diversity and flexibility of family relationships.

We share concern regarding the prioritising of agency over social norms and constraints in understanding modern-day families (Gilding, 2010; Liebroer & Billari, 2010) and contend that the emergence of multigenerational households in Australia is the result of both structural changes and individual agency. Structural changes in regards to housing provision, the casualisation of the workforce, the changing ethnic makeup of cities, the ageing of the population and associated public policies have a significant impact on the decisions people make to live in multigenerational households. These decisions are mediated by social and cultural norms and people's ever-changing understandings of who they are (their identities), and their changing relationships with other people (including family members) and places (including those places they call 'home') (Easthope & Gabriel, 2008). Furthermore, changes in structural factors can also actively precipitate subsequent changes in actions and expectations (Mitchell & Lovegreen, 2009). While the rise of multigenerational households in Australian cities may result from family members' agency in choosing this particular living arrangement, this is often done in response to broader structural changes that have indirectly impacted on the daily lives of Australian families.

### **Acknowledgements**

This paper is based on research carried out as part of an Australian Research Council Discovery Grant (DP120100956). We would like to thank all of the people who took part in our survey and shared their experiences of multigenerational living with us.

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