

## Rethinking Intergenerational Living: Life Course Research with Immigrant Families in Toronto



### What this research is about

Intergenerational living is often seen as an ideal way of providing care for senior family members. Some cultures are thought of as preferring intergenerational living, either due to filial piety or cultural norms. In Canada, rising housing costs and lack of senior supports are contributing to intergenerational living among many immigrant families, regardless of their desire to do so or not. This study examines the assumption that intergenerational living is the ideal situation for providing care for immigrant seniors. It also looks at how socioeconomic status and migration timing impacts intergenerational living.

### What the researcher did

Nineteen participants from the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) and Hamilton, Ontario, were recruited from multiple sources, such as churches, community organizations, and social media. Ten were immigrant seniors and 9 were unpaid family caregivers. Seniors were required to be at least 65 years old and have been born in Latin America or the Caribbean. Caregivers were required to be related to the seniors by birth, marriage, or adoption. Two interview guides were developed, one for the senior immigrants and one for the caregivers. Questions for the seniors included topics such as family relations, daily routines, community services and supports, migration trajectories, and views on senior care. Questions for the caregivers included reasons for caregiving, supports provided, past experiences of care and migration, services used, and policy recommendations. The interviews with the seniors were less structured, allowing them to tell their personal stories.

### What you need to know

Intergenerational living is often portrayed as an ideal way of providing care for senior family members, especially in immigrant families. Realistically, it can be a difficult arrangement to accommodate, depending on the socioeconomic status of the family and their time of migration.

This study found that for seniors who had immigrated more recently to Canada, it was often more difficult for caregivers to provide sufficient care. These seniors tended to have limited income and language barriers. Housing affordability and crowding were major concerns. Some seniors were resistant to living with caregivers, citing the loss of independence or access to their community as reasons. Some seniors experienced isolation, even after moving in with their caregivers, and some had to provide unpaid labour around the home. In contrast, seniors who had immigrated earlier had more positive experiences of intergenerational living. These seniors were more financially secure and were more likely to own a house, contributing to more balanced household contributions and support.

Analysis of the interview data was guided by a life course framework. This approach considers how a person's past life events and psychosocial factors influence current experiences and views. The researcher considered temporal and social contexts, as well as the agency of the seniors and how linked lives, including interpersonal relationships and situations, shaped care, and living arrangements.

### What the researcher found

Resistance to intergenerational living was expressed by some senior participants. The reasons given ranged from a perceived loss of independence, worry about being a financial burden to their children, and loss of access to their cultural community. Several caregivers were adult children who had moved to the suburbs in order to find more affordable housing; moving in with their children would isolate the seniors from their community connections and public transit, which were usually centralized in downtown Toronto.

Intergenerational living is seen as an ideal way of providing supportive and sufficient care for seniors, but this is not always the case. Some of the seniors living with their caregivers still experienced isolation. Moreover, they might be required to take on domestic tasks, especially senior women. Others spoke about having no privacy or little freedom, as they had to live in cramped quarters with their caregivers due to the lack of financial resources.

However, several participants reported very positive experiences, where contributions to the household were balanced and reciprocal. This happened most often where the caregivers had moved into a home owned by the immigrant seniors. Seniors who had immigrated to Canada earlier in life tended to be more financially stable and secure in older age. By contrast, seniors who had immigrated within the past 5 to 25 years tended to be less financially secure and more reliant on government supports and their adult children. This contributed to more stressful experiences with intergenerational living.

Unfortunately, most housing in Canada is not built with intergenerational living in mind. This creates problems in terms of space and affordability. Seniors who are on fixed incomes often cannot contribute to household expenses, and buying or renting larger homes is becoming difficult for even middle-class families, especially in urban centres. For one senior, the small living space resulted in her daughter's decision to send her back to the Dominican Republic indefinitely without consulting her.

### How you can use this research

Access to affordable housing should be increased for not only municipally subsidized housing, but also private rentals. The eligibility for subsidized housing should be expanded to accommodate intergenerational living. Different types of housing should be considered to enable intergenerational living or independent living for seniors, along with access to supports. Funding for community care and senior centres should also be increased.

### About the researcher

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*Research Snapshot by Erika Cao*

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