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Nuclear family no more: New data shows more grandparents raising kids, more unmarried couples

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BY JOHN WISELY AND KRISTI TANNER-WHITE
DETROIT FREE PRESS STAFF WRITERS

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The nuclear family that once was the norm -- think Ozzie and Harriet for readers old enough to remember -- continues to shrink in Michigan and across the nation, census data released today shows.

- Michigan unmarried households on the rise: Interactive map

On the rise are households with fewer children and more unmarried couples. There also are more homes with grandparents helping to raise young children and more people living alone.

"You see the increasing numbers of unmarried partners with and without kids," said Kurt Metzger, a demographer with Data Driven Detroit. "More people having kids and deciding to not get married or getting married after they have a kid."

Just 37% of Wayne County households include a husband and a wife, a figure driven by Detroit, where 78% of children are born to unwed women, Metzger said. In Oakland and Macomb counties, households with a married couple comprise 51% and 50%, respectively.

The number of households with three or more generations also is rising. Researchers said some involve young families moving in with grandparents for economic reasons and others involve aging parents who can't afford assisted-living homes moving in with their children.

Changes in metro Detroit households may have ripple effect

Carol Summers helps raise her grandsons, Dorien and Gerald, who live with their mother in Summers' east-side Detroit home.

Part of it is social. She enjoys taking the boys to parks and museums and volunteering at their school. But part of it is economics, like grocery shopping.



Carol Summers, 60, left, is helping to raise two of her grandchildren. She says she enjoys being involved in their lives, but economics also is a factor. "You're buying in bulk," Summers said. "It's easier that way." With her are daughter Shayla Summers, 27, and grandsons Dorien Summers, 5, and Gerald

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About one in 12 Detroit homes has more than two generations living under one roof, the third-highest percentage in Michigan after River Rouge and Royal Oak Township, according to new census data released today. The data helps quantify what long has been known.

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"It doesn't surprise me because it's like they used to do it down south," Summers said. "I know from my older sisters and brothers that this was the trend, and it's becoming more common up in the northern states."

The presence of more grandparents in the home is just one of the changes occurring in Michigan families. New census data shows fewer homes have married couples in them,

and when they do, they are less likely to have children.

"Fewer children definitely," said state demographer Ken Darga. "That partly reflects the number of people who are of age to have children at home. As we have more retirees, they aren't going to be having children."

Michigan's median age rose from 35.5 in 2000 to 38.9 in 2010, according to the census.

Michigan also was the only state to lose population in the past 10 years, declining about 0.6% while the nation as a whole was growing. Many of those who left were young people just out of college, Darga said.

"Their children will be born outside the state of Michigan," he said.

The changing demographics raise questions for policy makers, especially educators. Detroit Public Schools has been closing buildings and consolidating services for years as the number of students dwindled. Suburban districts face similar issues.

Russ Olwell helps teach future teachers at Eastern Michigan University, and he's seen up close the change in Michigan families.

"When you call a child's home, you can't assume you're going to get a parent," said Olwell, director of the Institute for the Study of Children, Families and Communities. "You may get a grandparent, you may get a neighbor. The mom who is going to be the room mom for the elementary school, that might not be there anymore."

Olwell said he teaches future teachers to be conscious of the changes.

"You can't make assumptions about that kid based on that," he said.

Olwell said the only thing new about the decline of the nuclear family is that it's happening to people further up the income scale.



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"For 30 or 40 years, the kind of structural shift we see now in the middle class we saw in poorer families," he said.

Unmarried couples living together also are increasing in Michigan and other states, the data show. While still only 6% of Michigan's households, there are now 247,283 households with unmarried partners in them, up 22% from a decade ago.

In metro Detroit, Ferndale had the highest percentage of unmarried couples living together, at 11.2%. About 26% of those couples are same-sex couples, according to the census.

"You're getting a lot of young professionals that quite often are just living together just out of college, and of course the gay community," said former Ferndale Mayor Robert Porter. "It's an energetic community that tends to invest a lot in their house. It generally has been a beneficial aspect to the city of Ferndale."

The census data also show a decline in home ownership during the past decade, falling from 73.8% to 72.1%.

"Homeownership rates are down for people under age 65 and up for people age 75," Darga said. "This reflects the fact that it is hard for young people to buy homes, hard for older people to sell their homes, and hard for many people with mortgages to keep their homes."

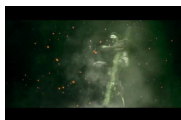
That trend bodes ill for neighborhoods, said Kurt Metzger, director of Data Driven Detroit, a nonprofit research firm.

"It leads to less stable communities," Metzger said "You're much less apt to have active community participation if you have renters. You get into absentee landlords. You see a neighborhood where the grass isn't mowed or is less well-kept."

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