

The Wellbeing of Transnational Grandparents of Migrant Families



What this research is about

Canada receives migrants from around the world. However, many migrant families are in a situation of maintaining relationships with stay-behind parents/grandparents transnationally for very long periods or even permanently. This is due to immigration policies that prioritize younger, highly educated individuals and limit family sponsorship primarily to spouses and children, with strict annual quotas for sponsoring parents and grandparents. For transnational stay-behind grandparents, the separation can bring both benefits, such as improved living conditions and health care access, and challenges, such as loneliness, anxiety, and isolation. This research examines the wellbeing and ill-being of transnational grandparents whose adult children and grandchildren live in Montreal, Quebec.

What the researchers did

The researchers analyzed data from a qualitative study that they conducted between 2018 and 2021. The original research involved 37 migrant families in Montreal and their family members living outside of Canada.

For this study, the researchers focused on 28 migrant families in which grandparents were actively involved and had close relationships. Twenty transnational grandparents (16 grandmothers and 4 grandfathers) participated in online interviews through WhatsApp. The families were from different countries, including Colombia, Mexico, Congo, Bangladesh, France, Nigeria, Haiti, Portugal, Belgium, Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroun, Lebanon, Algeria, Malawi, Cuba, and Chile. About one-third of these families had migrated as asylum seekers or refugees, while the remaining two-thirds arrived as students or economic migrants, or through family sponsorship.

What you need to know

This study examines the wellbeing and ill-being of 20 grandparents living outside of Canada whose children and grandchildren have migrated to Montreal, Quebec. The researchers found that grandparents' experiences were shaped by their perspectives on the separation, relationships with migrant family members, ability to provide support, and degree of socioeconomic dependence within the family. The study highlights that grandparents' wellbeing is closely linked to the wellbeing of their migrant family members. It calls for immigration and travel policies that facilitate faster family reunification and improve access to super visas for grandparents to visit for extended periods.

What the researchers found

The researchers identified four themes that illustrate how sociocultural, economic, and migration contexts influence transnational grandparents' wellbeing and ill-being:

1. **Perspectives and feelings about the transnational circumstances:** Grandparents differed greatly in how they thought of the separation. Some adopted a pragmatic and optimistic outlook, accepting the distance and focusing on the benefits migration had brought to their children and grandchildren. Others felt sadness, loneliness, and a sense of loss. This was particularly the case when immigration or travel policies delayed reunification, or when grandparents worried about their migrant family's socioeconomic circumstances in Canada.

2. **Relationships with migrant family members:** For many grandparents, strong familial ties were maintained through frequent and open communication, creating virtual co-presence despite the distance. However, in certain cases, relationships were strained by missed calls, fear of being a burden, cultural or religious conflicts, and the painful reality of being a stranger to grandchildren who left for Canada at an early age.
3. **Experience of the support role:** The ability to provide support was a key source of pride, purpose, and connection for grandparents. These grandparents offered child care during visits to Canada, emotional support, and financial assistance; they took satisfaction in knowing they were helping their families thrive. However, others felt frustrated and useless when unable to contribute in the ways they wished. In some cases, attempts to help were perceived as undervalued or unappreciated.
4. **Family dynamics of independence vs. dependence:** Grandparents who were socially and financially independent from their migrant children generally reported greater life satisfaction. By contrast, those who relied on their children for emotional or financial support often experienced greater distress, a loss of control, and reduced wellbeing.

How you can use this research

The findings suggest that health and social care providers working with migrants could adopt a transnational lens. For example, involving stay-behind grandparents in care interactions could help foster family wellbeing. Migration and travel policies that facilitate faster family reunification and improve access to super visas could support family connections. Supporting the successful resettlement of migrant families, such as by helping them find employment and obtain legal status in Canada rapidly, could improve the wellbeing of both migrant families and transnational grandparents.

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Research Snapshot by Patrick Chi Kai Lam

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