

## Intergenerational Support and Family Composition of Elderly Households in Cuba

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### Extended Abstract:

As a consequence of both political and economic isolation, Western researchers have had only limited opportunities to study demographic trends in Cuba. Even less work has been done on family composition, particularly regarding care giving and other intergenerational exchanges among the elderly households. Using data recently collected as part of the broader PAHO and NIA initiative to examine the lives of the elderly in Latin America, this paper presents the first thorough review of intergenerational support patterns among the elderly in Cuba. Looking at both economic and in-kind exchange patterns this paper presents analysis on how the composition of elderly households impacts giving patterns and levels of support, and how the health of the elderly and their ability to contribute to household economies impacts both the intensity of support they receive and their power or status within the household itself.

### Introduction

Patterns of intergeneration support and family exchange vary by culture and economic status, both at the household and the geopolitical level. An extensive literature of family support has consistently found that all societies engage in some level of intergeneration support. The variation in what constitutes support can vary greatly, but in general, few societies allow the open abandonment of the aged. Levels and types of support are typically impacted by social factors such as the density of coresident or contiguous kin which in turn is impacted by external factors such as labor force migration. Levels of support are also impacted by the presence or lack of programs that

relieve the immediate family of the direct care burden and financial cost of the elderly such as pensions, social security, provident funds and other forms of portable wealth.

Ultimately, however, most researchers agree with Martin's (1990) conclusion that in developing nations, family support continues to represent the best form of care for the elderly even if this care is imperfect. This conclusion is supported in work by Williams and Domingo (1993) in their examination of the status of elderly females in the Philippines, a country facing most of the economic and social burdens that strain the capacity of families to directly support their elderly. At the other extreme, when looking at small populations in island isolates, McNally (2003) found that while status and the provision of care was conditional on the health of the elderly, even under suboptimal conditions family support as measured by coresidence was superior to independent living.

Exploring these issues in Latin America, Palloni et al (2002) have done groundbreaking work to expand our understanding of aging in this severely understudied part of the world. Using data from the SABE study of seven Latin American and Caribbean nations they have argued that this part of the world was "aging prematurely" due to weak government infrastructures, poverty and pervasive inequalities. This pattern of an early onset of impairment combined with poor economic opportunities and an inadequate health system represent serious challenges to both families and governments services despite a desire to provide a high quality of life to their elders.

The current paper builds upon the work of Palloni, Pelaez and others and takes in into new directions. Using the Cuban panel of the SABE data collection, we look at patterns of family exchanges and support in both directions of the aged/young adult dyad.

We are interested in how variation in these exchange patterns are impact by health and how disability and impairment affect the status and the well being of the elderly in Cuba.

Theoretically, this analysis is attractive as Cuba has faced unusual levels of isolation for a nation so close to the US Mainland and other nations on the American continent. While not a complete geographic isolate, Cuba represents a society that has had to draw heavily on internal resources and a result we would expect many traditional values associated with family support and responsibility to be more stable across time that would be the case in a society with greater cultural and media exchanges with Western nations. Prior work by McNally, Panapasa and others has suggested that declining health and disability can negatively impact the status and the level of support an elder receives. It will be informative to see if this finding can be replicated for the Cuban case or if traditional Latin family values of support and care remain stable in the face of the rising costs and caretaker burden associated with declining health and increased need.

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