

Complex Kinship Networks: Step-Grandparenthood in the Netherlands

Vera de Bel & Karsten Hank

Short abstract

Following the sustained rise in divorce rates and re-partnering, families have become more diverse and complex, leading to the emergence of new family roles and relationships. In this paper, we examine the prevalence of both skipped and inherited step-grandparenthood in Dutch kinship networks. Inherited step-grandparenthood arises from the moment a child's parents re-partner, as it concerns the step-parents' parents. Skipped step-grandparenthood, however, begins when children are born into a setting where their parents already have step-parents. Ties to skipped step-grandparents therefore have the potential to be as strong as ties to biological grandparents, as both are present from birth and coexist alongside biological grandparents. Utilizing longitudinal Dutch population network data, we reveal a stable trend in inherited step-grandparenthood and a clear rise in skipped step-grandparenthood, showing that one in five children aged 0–12 had more than four grandparents in 2023. Enlarged grandparent generations imply growing pressure on family members in supporting older relatives.

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Extended abstract

Since the 1970s, Western divorce rates have doubled, reaching a peak in the 1990s (Eurostat, 2021). Consequently, 25% of children in Western Europe have experienced parental divorce, and 40% of these children have grown up in a stepfamily (Thomson, 2014), leading to fundamental changes in one of the most important institutions of social life: the family. As a result, families have become more diverse and complex, leading to the emergence of new family roles and relationships.

Despite family scientists' longstanding interest in the study of step-families, the investigation of step-grandparenthood was only mentioned in passing as "another promising area of ongoing stepfamily research" in Sweeney's (2010, p. 677) *Journal of Marriage and Family Decade Review*. Ten years later, Raley and Sweeney (2020, p. 91) noted that "attention to step-grandparenthood [had] increased in the past decade" – and this upward trend continues until today, reflecting the importance of understanding intergenerational dynamics within stepfamilies.

Inherited step-grandparenthood arises from the moment a child's parents re-partner, as it concerns the step-parents' parents (e.g., Sanner et al., 2019). In line with research on intergenerational solidarity in adult parent-child relationships (e.g., Steinbach & Hank, 2016; van der Pas & van Tilburg, 2025), recent studies suggest generally weaker ties between [inherited] step-grandparents (SGP) and [inherited] step-grandchildren (SGC) compared to their biologically related counterparts (e.g., Steinbach & Silverstein, 2020; see Mongeon et al., 2025, for a recent review).

Skipped step-grandparenthood, however, begins when children are born into a setting where their parents already have step-parents (e.g., Chapman et al., 2016). Ties to skipped step-

grandparents therefore have the potential to be as strong as ties to biological grandparents, as both are present from birth and coexist alongside biological grandparents. Skipped SGPs may in fact “be viewed as a ‘bonus’ family member within the kinship matrix and serve as an additional filial resource” (Steinbach & Silverstein, 2020, p. 1153). Conversely, step-(grand-)parents might impose additional caregiving responsibilities and consequently burden the younger generations (van der Pas & van Tilburg, 2025).

Even though high rates of separation and repartnering have resulted in increasing shares of SGPs across birth cohorts (Yahirun et al., 2018), barely anything is known yet about the actual size of this “relational reserve” (Cullati et al., 2018) in demographically advanced societies. Yahirun et al. (2018) found that one in five U.S. baby boomer grandparents aged 51 or older had at least one SGC. However, this estimate constitutes a lower bound of the prevalence of SGPs, because only those were identified as skipped SGP were included. Other quantitative studies are ‘biased’ by exclusively examining inherited SGP (e.g., Poortman, 2024). Being able to account for such different pathways to step-grandparenthood is obviously important to obtain accurate estimates of its prevalence, and is also necessary to eventually explore the complexity of SGP-SGC relationship qualities (Chapman, Sanner, et al., 2016).

Our descriptive study uses unique longitudinal whole population network data to provide information on the proportions of families with skipped generation and inherited SGPs in the Netherlands and how they developed over time between 2009 and 2023. An advantage of examining the Dutch example is that it has been suggested to be an ‘average case’, both in terms of the determinants of and trends in divorce. Divorce rates in the Netherlands rose sharply between 1965 and 1985 and have since then stabilized at an intermediate level, with Southern European countries exhibiting substantially lower divorce rates, whereas higher levels of divorce are common in Northern European countries and particularly in the United States (de Graaf & Kalmijn, 2006; also see Amato & James, 2010, Figure 1). Our results can thus be

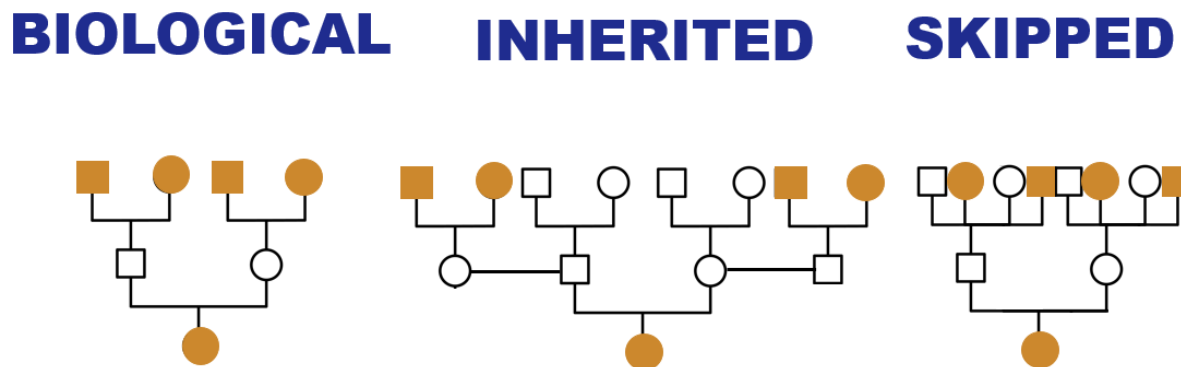
expected to be fairly generalizable to other countries having experienced the second demographic transition.

Methods

Our analysis is based on the family layer of a whole population network file derived from administrative data released by Statistics Netherlands (van der Laan et al., 2023). Specifically, we use the multilayer network library created by Bokányi et al. (2023). The family layer is derived from the full parent–child administrative register, which started on January 1st, 1995. Parent–child links are administered by birth (for mothers) and recognition (for fathers), or by legal adoption. Recently, the longitudinal population network files, covering the years 2009-2023, have been published (CBS, 2022). These files are derived on January 1st of each corresponding year.

Three types of grandparenthood were derived. First of all, ‘biological’ grandparenthood (Figure 1, left pedigree) was pre-derived logically from two-generational parent-child links by Statistics Netherlands. There are a maximum of four grandparents in the scenario of biological grandparenthood. Second, inherited step-grandparenthood (Figure 1, middle pedigree) was derived by adding parents to the child’s step-parent links. This way, parents of the child’s step-parents could be derived, who are the child’s inherited step-grandparents. Thus, in this scenario, the parental divorce occurred in the middle generation and there are a maximum of four inherited step-grandparents. Third, skipped step-grandparenthood (Figure 1, right pedigree) was derived by adding step-parents to the child’s parent links, leading to step-parents of the child’s parents, who are the child’s skipped step-grandparents. Thus, the divorce occurred in the parent generation, for instance during the childhood of the middle generation, or as a grey. Again, there are a maximum of four skipped step-grandparents.

Figure 1. Types of (step-)grandparenthood



The analytical sample concerns all Dutch children aged 0-12 years. The N varies per year between 1.8 million children in 2009 and 1.6 million children in 2023. First and second-generation migrants were excluded from the analyses as it is impossible to derive grandparent ties from children who themselves or their parents migrated to the Netherlands).

Results

Figure 1 shows that in 2009, Dutch children had on average 0.09 inherited step-grandparents and 0.25 skipped step-grandparents. In 2023, the mean number of inherited step-grandparents remained 0.09, whereas the mean number of skipped step-grandparents rose to 0.37.

Figure 2. Children's mean number of step-grandparents

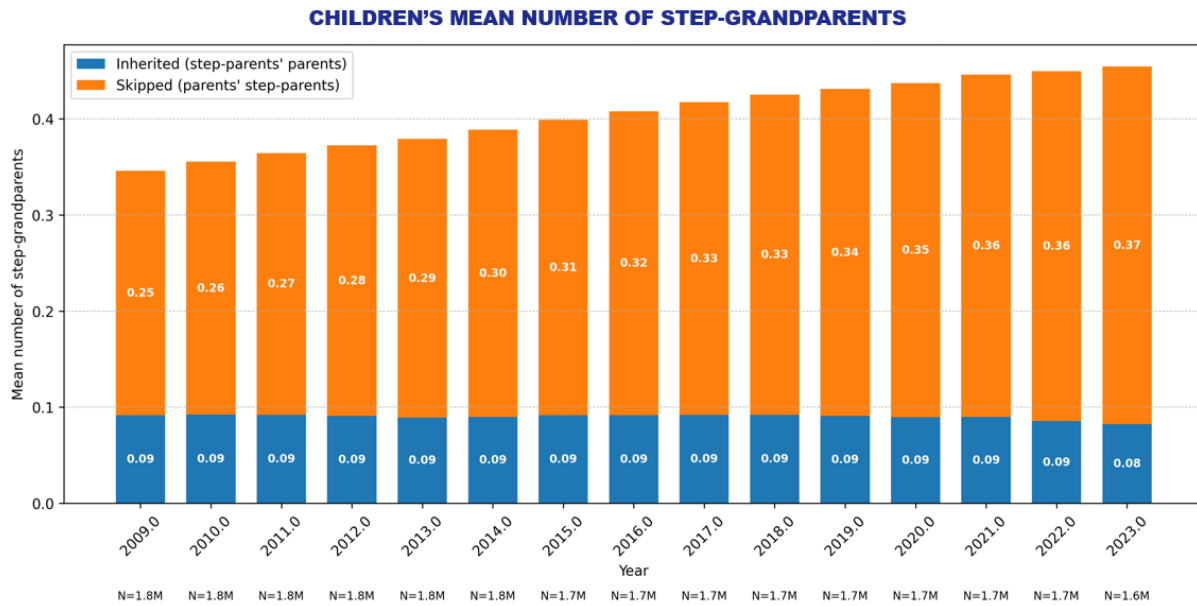
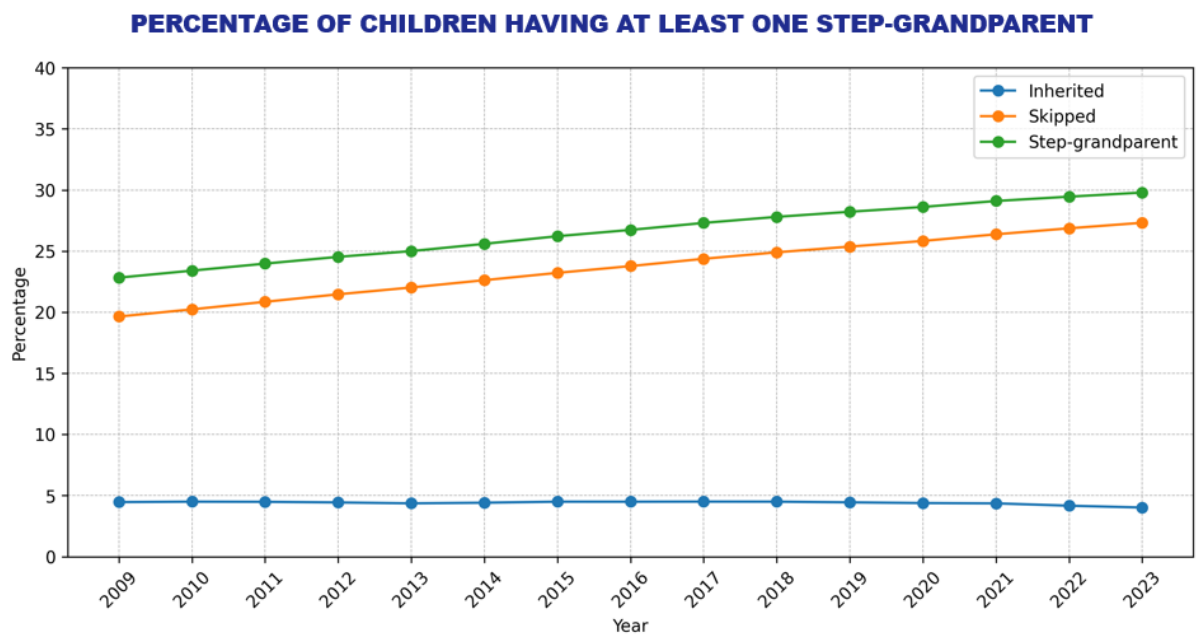


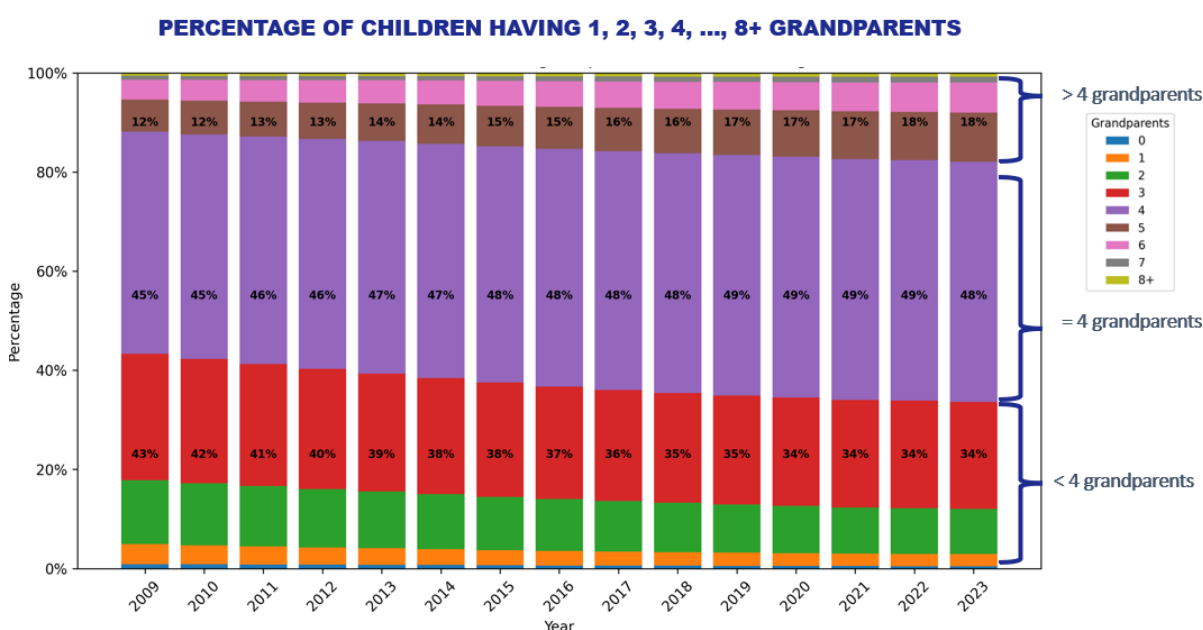
Figure 3 presents changes in the percentage of Dutch children who have at least one inherited step-grandparent and at least one skipped step-grandparent. Again, the percentage of children with at least one inherited step-grandparent remained stable over the years 2009–2023, with an average of 5 percent. The percentage of children with at least one skipped step-grandparent, however, increased from 23 percent in 2009 to 30 percent in 2023.

Figure 3. Percentage of children having at least one step-grandparent



Lastly, as a result of the increase in step-grandparents, the percentage of children with more than four grandparents has grown. Figure 4 presents changes in the percentage of Dutch children with more than four grandparents and shows that the percentage of children having exactly four grandparents remained more or less stable, from 45 percent in 2009 to 48 percent in 2023. The percentage of children with fewer than four grandparents decreased from 43 percent in 2009 to 34 percent in 2023. The percentage of children with more than four grandparents increased from 12 percent in 2009 to 18 percent in 2023.

Figure 4. Percentage of children having 1,2,3,4, ..., 8+ grandparents



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