

Grandfamilies: Challenges of Caring for the Second Family

Introduction

Imagine you are a child who in the middle of the night is dropped off at grandma's house to live. Your mom can't care for you anymore because she's addicted to drugs. You're glad to be with grandma because it feels safe and comfortable at her house, but you're worried about some things. Where will you go to school? How will you get your asthma medicine? Can grandma get it for you?

Parental substance abuse is just one of the many reasons that can cause a "grandfamily" to come together. Others include parental military deployment, incarceration, mental or physical illness, and death. Whatever the cause, when parents are unable to care for their children, grandparents and other relatives often step in as a safety net to keep families together. In this fact sheet, we will explore what we know about these "grandfamilies" or families headed by grandparents and other relatives who share their homes with their grandchildren, nieces, nephews, and/or other related children.

Over 6.7 million children across the country are living in "grandfamilies".¹

- Approximately 4.9 million of these children live with grandparent householders, and another 1.8 million live with other relative householders, such as aunts or uncles.²
- About 2.7 million children live with grandparent householders who are "responsible for most of the basic needs" of the children.³ Similar Census Bureau data does not exist for the other relatives.
- Over 960,000 children live with grandparent householders who are "responsible for most of the basic needs" of the children and the children's parents are not present in the home.⁴ Similar Census Bureau data does not exist for the other relatives.

There is no national data reporting how many of these grandparents and other relatives have a legal relationship – such as adoption, legal custody or guardianship – with the children. These legal ties affect access to services and resources for the families, such as the children's health care and education.

About 102,000 children are in foster care with relatives.⁵ Despite the fact that this is a low number when compared with all grandfamilies, the number still represents almost one-fourth of all children in foster care. For those families in foster care,



access to services, such as school enrollment, is typically easier than for those not in the formal system even if they have a legal relationship. In foster care, the state generally has legal custody of the children, so caseworkers and judges ease entry into schools and receipt of medical care. However, regardless of whether inside or outside the foster care system, grandfamilies' access to resources and services needs to be improved dramatically.

Who are these Grandfamilies?

Grandfamilies span the racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, and geographic spectrum. The majority has young children, and grandparents who are under age 60, still in the labor force, and own their own homes. Understanding these statistics is crucial to designing policies and programs that respond to the families' needs and strengths.

Grandfamilies are racially and ethnically diverse

- 55% of the 4.9 million children living with grandparent householders are white, 27% are black, 3% are Asian, 2% are American Indian and Alaska Native, 0.3% are Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander, 8% are of some other race, and 6% are of two or more races. Of these children, 24% are Hispanic or Latino origin (of any race) and 41% are white alone, not of Hispanic or Latino origin.⁶
- Because of the diversity of the families, programs and policies need to be culturally sensitive, written materials may be needed in two or more languages, and multilingual staff might be essential.

Grandfamilies are often young

- 45% of children living with grandparent householders who are responsible for most of the children's basic needs are under 6 years old, 29% are between the ages of 6, and 11, and 26% are ages 12 to 17.⁷
- 67% of all grandparent householders responsible for most of the basic needs of their grandchildren are under the age of 60.⁸
- Knowing the age of the caregivers and children help programmers and policymakers design appropriate services for these families.

Grandfamilies live both below and above the poverty level

- 26% of children living with grandparent householders who are responsible for most of the children's basic needs have income in the past 12 months below the poverty level, and 74% have income in the past 12 months at or above the poverty level.⁹
- 20% of all grandparent householders responsible for most of the basic needs of their grandchildren have income in the past 12 months below the poverty level, and 80% have income in the past 12 months at or above the poverty level.¹⁰
- Income is one factor to consider when determining which services and resources to offer to grandfamilies; many other factors, including legal relationship to the children, also affect a grandfamily's challenges and should be considered by programmers and policymakers.

Most grandparents in grandfamilies are in the labor force

- 60% of grandparent householders responsible for most of the basic needs of their grandchildren are in the labor force.¹¹
- Since most caregivers are under age 60 and still in the work force, child care and before and after school activities are programs that need to be considered for these families.

Most grandparents in grandfamilies own their home

- 72% of grandparent householders responsible for most of the basic needs of their grandchildren own their home.¹³
- Caregivers' homes may not be big enough to accommodate children. Policymakers should consider designing housing programs to help homeowners add bedrooms and bathrooms at an affordable cost.



No matter why parents can no longer take care of their children — death, divorce, neglect, abuse or poverty — it never, ever is the 'fault' of the child.¹²

What Challenges do Grandfamilies Face?

Over the past several years, available data has helped to uncover grandfamilies' challenges and strengths and respond with supportive laws and programs. Generations United and its many partners have collectively made great strides, but important work remains to be done.

Legal

Legal issues are frequently among the top concerns for grandfamilies:

- The process of obtaining a legal relationship with the children – such as adoption, legal custody or guardianship – is usually expensive, time-consuming, and can be disruptive to family dynamics.
- Opting to raise the children without any legal relationship may severely limit caregivers' ability to access services on the children's behalf.
- Private attorneys may be unaffordable, and other existing legal resources – such as legal aid and law school clinics – may be unknown.
- Kinship navigator programs help link caregivers with legal resources, but most states do not have these programs.
- The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 has given states the option to use federal child welfare funds (Title IV-E of the Social Security Act) to fund guardianship assistance programs so eligible children in the foster care system can exit the system to guardianship with a relative who has already been providing long-term care. Almost half the states still need to take action to embrace this opportunity to provide another viable permanency option for grandfamilies.
- Other creative legal options, such as de facto custody, only exist in a handful of states.
- Many states still lack medical and education consent laws, which allow caregivers without a legal relationship to the children to access school enrollment and necessary health care on their behalf.

Physical and Mental Health

The children and caregivers in grandfamilies face serious physical and mental health challenges and obstacles:

- Children being raised by grandparents exhibit a variety of physical, behavioral, and emotional problems to a greater degree than the general population of children, often due to the difficult situations that caused them to be placed in the grandparent's care.¹⁴

- Relative caregivers often face obstacles enrolling the children they raise in either public or private health insurance. Some states impose restrictive policies – such as requiring caregivers to prove that they are related to children – that make it difficult to enroll the children in Medicaid or the Children’s Health Insurance Program. Private insurance frequently requires adoption in order for children to be included on caregivers’ policies.
- Caregivers are often unable to attend to their own medical needs due to a lack of daycare, respite care or adequate medical insurance.
- Grandparent caregivers have been found to frequently suffer stress-related health problems like depression, diabetes, hypertension, insomnia, and gastric distress.¹⁵
- Supportive services – such as caregiver support groups, respite, and counseling – help the families cope with their physical and mental health issues, but these services may be unavailable. The National Family Caregiver Support Program – which federally funds Area Agencies on Aging (AAAs) to help relative and other family caregivers – is limited. It is restricted to relative caregivers age 55 and older, no more than 10% of the funds can be used to help these caregivers, and some AAAs opt not to serve them at all.



“It was easier for them to adjust with me because I’m their grandmother.”

— Grandmother raising grandchildren

- The caregivers may no longer be able to afford their apartments or houses after assuming the extra expenses of raising children.
- Grandparents or other relative caregivers may be physically unable to walk up and down stairs with children and strollers.
- If the caregivers live in public senior housing with children, they may be wrongfully evicted because of the children.
- The presence of children may violate private lease agreements.
- If relative caregivers do not have legal custody of the children, they are often unable to convince the housing authorities to recognize their need for larger apartments.

Education

Many school policies are geared towards “nuclear” families, and can pose obstacles for grandfamilies, especially those families in which there are no legal ties:

- Children may be denied school enrollment because their relative caregivers do not have guardianship or legal custody.
- Contrary to the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, grandparents and other relatives acting as parents may have difficulty being included as a participant in the Individual Education Plan (IEP) process for children with disabilities.
- Relative caregivers may be excluded from school activities that usually include parents. For example, despite the fact that grandparents with whom children live are explicitly included as “parents” in Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, some localities may exclude them from “parental” activities in disadvantaged schools funded through that Act.

Conclusion

All children need an appropriate education and necessary health care. These services must be provided regardless of who is raising them. Policies and programs at the federal, state, and local levels should encourage, rather than discourage, the responsible actions of relatives who step forward to take care of children. Public awareness through community education and media outreach is an integral part of any effort to support these families. As an aid towards improving public knowledge, Generations United has created this fact sheet to freely distribute and use as a resource for general information about grandfamilies. Together with the grandfamilies themselves, policy makers, and advocates, Generations United will continue to work to improve the lives of children and adults in these special caregiving arrangements.

Housing

Grandfamilies often begin caring for children without warning or preparation, and face unique problems with respect to housing:

- Many relative caregivers live on fixed incomes and/or in small apartments and houses that are not suitable for children.



Some Available Internet Resources

www.gu.org – Additional free fact sheets and publications on grandfamilies, including the latest federal public policy activity concerning the families.

www.grandfamilies.org - A database of laws and legislation affecting grandfamilies both inside and outside the foster care system for all 50 states and the District of Columbia, in addition to analyses of these laws and legislation.

www.grandfactsheets.org - Fact sheets for each state and the District of Columbia containing specific state information related to grandfamilies, including a comprehensive list of resources and services.

For further information, please contact: Generations United (GU), 1331 H Street, N.W., Suite 900, Washington, D.C. 20005 (202) 289-3979, Fax: (202) 289-3952; e-mail: gu@gu.org.
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Generations United (GU) is the national membership organization focused solely on improving the lives of children, youth, and older people through intergenerational strategies, programs, and public policies. Generations United represents more than 100 national, state, and local organizations and individuals representing more than 70 million Americans. Since 1986, Generations United has served as a resource for educating policymakers and the public about the economic, social, and personal imperatives of intergenerational cooperation. Generations United acts as a catalyst for stimulating collaboration between aging, children, and youth organizations providing a forum to explore areas of common ground while celebrating the richness of each generation.

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¹ American Community Survey (ACS) 2005-2009. Table B09006, Relationship by Householder for Children Under 18 Years in Households. Accessed April 14, 2011 at http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/DTable?_bm=y&-geo_id=01000US&-ds_name=ACS_2009_5YR_G00_&-lang=en&-caller=geoselect&-state=dt&-format=&-mt_name=ACS_2009_5YR_G2000_B09006

² Ibid.

³ American Community Survey (ACS) 2005-2009. Table S1001, Grandchildren Characteristics. Accessed April 14, 2011 at http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/S1Table?ds_name=ACS_2009_5YR_G00_&state=st&qr_name=ACS_2009_5YR_G00_S1001&-lang=en&-ts=320849487623

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Children's Bureau, the AFCARS Report Preliminary FY 2009 Estimates as of July 2010. Accessed April 14, 2011 at http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/stats_research/afcars/tar/report17.htm Please note that there are limitations with AFCARS data as well, and children in relative foster care may be underrepresented: in some states, children must receive foster care stipends to be counted and some children living with relatives do not receive this assistance; some states do not distinguish between licensed relative foster parents and non-related licensed foster parents; and children who are placed with relatives through a voluntary placement agreement may not be counted at all.

⁶ See note 3.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ American Community Survey (ACS) 2005-2009. Table S1002. Grandparents. Accessed April 14, 2011 at http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/S1Table?_bm=y&-geo_id=01000US&-qr_name=ACS_2009_5YR_G00_S1002&-ds_name=ACS_2009_5YR_G00_&-lang=en&-redoLog=false&-state=st

⁹ See note 3.

¹⁰ See note 8.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Generations United (September 2005). Grand Voices for America's Children: New perspectives on grandparents and other relatives raising children. Washington, D.C. This phrase was the top probe tested by messaging experts on five focus groups – two comprised of relative caregivers only and three of members of the general public. This probe resonated with each group.

¹³ See note 8.

¹⁴ Altshuler, S.J. (1998). Child Well-Being in Kinship Foster Care: Similar To, or Different From, Non-Related Foster Care, *Children and Youth Services Review* 20, 369-88, and Pruchno, R. (1999). Raising Grandchildren: The Experiences of Black and White Grandmothers, *The Gerontologist* 39, 209-31.

¹⁵ Minkler, M. (1999). Intergenerational Households Headed by Grandparents: Contexts, Realities, and Implications for Policy, *Journal of Aging Studies* 13, 199-218.