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New report finds grandparent-headed households experience food insecurity at twice the national rate

White House's recent push for protections for food-insecure families is a major step forward, but the plan could do more to support "grandfamilies"

(Washington, DC, November 2, 2022) — According to a [new report](#) released today by Generations United, the 2.5 million children in the United States growing up in “grandfamilies” face higher rates of hunger and food insecurity than their peers. Grandfamilies are families in which children are being raised by relatives – grandparents, aunts, uncles, siblings, or close friends – without their parents in the home. In fact, **25 percent of grandparent-headed households experienced food insecurity** between 2019 and 2020. That is more than twice the national rate. Food insecurity negatively impacts a child’s ability to learn and grow and has long-term health implications.

The rate of food insecurity among all grandparent-headed households with grandchildren is **60 percent higher than that of all households with children** (25% vs. 15%). And perhaps the most stark finding in the report: the rate of food insecurity for households where grandparents are raising grandchildren with no parents present **where the grandparents are older than 60 is more than three times higher** than the rate of similar households with no children.

“Research shows being raised by a family member or close friend is the best option for children who can’t be raised by their parents,” said Donna Butts, the executive director of Generations

United. “But our report clearly makes the case that these families face hunger and food insecurity at much higher rates than the average family. The need for nutrition and adequate food is universal, and every family, no matter their structure, deserves to be healthy and thrive. The fact that many of our policies and programs to reduce hunger were not designed with grandfamilies in mind should not stand in the way of this right.”

Recently, the White House released a [sweeping national strategy to reduce hunger](#). The plan is welcome and comprehensive on many levels and identifies some important steps to better support grandfamilies. For example, providing healthy school meals for all children will immediately provide nutritious food to children being raised in grandfamilies. Additionally, the White House’s call for improved outreach to maximize enrollment to grandfamilies who are eligible for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is an important change. However, the following key policy changes would improve the plan and cut food insecurity for many grandfamilies. These include:

- Developing quality [kinship navigator programs](#) which connect grandfamilies to supports and services in their communities. These programs should provide food and nutrition support to grandfamilies both inside and outside the child welfare system.
- Expanding access to SNAP by making a “child-only” benefit that is based on the needs of the child as opposed to household income, and by increasing outreach to grandfamilies.
- Ensuring automatic access to free and reduced-price school meals for children living in grandfamilies.
- Creating combined food and nutrition programs for older and younger people, including members of grandfamilies.

Please see [the report for a full list of policy recommendations](#) to help feed grandfamilies.

“The research is clear – grandfamilies are at greater risk of hunger,” said Luis Guardia, president of the Food Research & Action Center, which contributed data to the report. “But it doesn’t have to be this way. Connecting more grandfamilies to federal nutrition programs such as SNAP, WIC, and free school meals will go a long way in ensuring millions more children and their families have the nutrition they need to thrive. These proven solutions are critical to supporting grandfamilies so they are not forced to choose between paying the rent, affording needed medications, or feeding themselves and the children in their care.”

Grandfamily caregivers can face high levels of stress when raising a child who has experienced mental and physical trauma and food insecurity. These experiences can make children more vulnerable to eating disorders and developing complicated needs, habits, and preferences surrounding food. They often struggle to provide the nutritious food that a child needs because of the financial challenges that often come with unexpectedly raising children.

Other key report findings include:

- Grandfamilies are disproportionately African American and American Indian/Alaska Native, and, in some areas, Latino. (Specifically, 14% of all children in the U.S. are Black and 25% of children in grandfamilies are Black. One percent of children in the U.S. are American Indian or Alaska Native, but 8% of children in grandfamilies hold these identities.) Yet, years of structural racism and discrimination have led to disproportionate rates of food insecurity, as well as difficulties accessing support systems and inequitable supports for grandfamily caregivers and the children they raise.
- The proportion of grandfamilies is highest in the South. In fact, more than half of grandparent-headed households with no parents present are located in the Southern region. These are also the states with the highest percentages of food insecurity. This geographic distribution may be a contributing factor to hunger and food insecurity in grandfamilies being higher than the national average.
- A large number of grandfamilies live in rural areas and are likely to experience food insecurity at a higher rate, in part because food sources are often further away from home and transportation options are sparse.

“Caring for a child whose parents cannot, should not push those who step up to help into poverty or a state of food insecurity,” said Jamie Bussel, senior program officer for the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, which funded the report. “Our national nutrition programs have not been shaped and funded in a way that works for grandfamilies, so many of the solutions lie in policy change. We must ensure that food and nutrition supports reach all families in need, including grandfamilies.”

The report shares many personal examples from caregivers who have struggled to put food on the table after bringing children into their homes when their parents could not care for them.

“I tried to appear at friends’ houses around dinner time so they would include my grandchildren in the dinner,” said Alice Carter, who unexpectedly ended up raising her grandson and granddaughter when her daughter was unable to care for them. “They got so they would eat pretty much anything even if they didn’t like it. Sometimes people would give us food that had been in their refrigerator for two weeks, but it was better than nothing. Someone gave us a bag of oranges and we ate nothing but oranges for four days. Having access to nutritious food through programs like SNAP or WIC would have been a lifeline that would have made a major difference for my grandchildren and me.”

[Read the report.](#) Explore [state-by-state data on food insecurity rates](#) (select 2019-2021) and [state-by-state data on the number of children living in kinship care](#) (select 2020-2022).

Experts available for comment include Generations United’s Executive Director, Donna Butts, and Deputy Executive Director and Director of the National Center on Grandfamilies, Jaia Lent. Grandparents and other family and close friends who are leading “grandfamilies” are also available to talk with the media about their experiences.

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About Generations United

For more than three decades, Generations United has been the catalyst for policies and practices stimulating cooperation and collaboration among generations, evoking the vibrancy, energy and sheer productivity that result when people of all ages come together. We believe that we can only be successful in the face of our complex future if generational diversity is regarded as a national asset and fully leveraged. The National Center on Grandfamilies is a critical part of Generations United's mission and strives to enact policies and promote programs that support families where children are raised by their grandparents, aunts, uncles, siblings, or close friends, and Generations United's new National Technical Assistance Center on Grandfamilies and Kinship Families seeks to help systems break down their silos and improve supports for the families. www.gu.org