The State of Grandfamilies in America: 2014

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Who are the Children and Youth in Grandfamilies?

About 7.8 million children live in grandfamilies.[1] Some grandfamilies are multigenerational households where families pool resources and grandparents provide care so parents can work. In others, grandparents or other relatives have stepped in to keep children out of foster care when parents are unable to care for them. Sometimes grandparents have stepped in and a parent may still be present and living in the household but not providing for most of the basic needs of a child, such as a teen parent. In other instances, grandparents receive a call in the middle of the night from child protective services and become full-time, sole caregivers to their grandchildren in a matter of hours. While grandparents are more often the relative that steps in, these scenarios also play out with aunts, uncles, older siblings, and even close family friends.

Grandfamilies are diverse and come together for a variety of reasons—including job loss, out of state employment, military deployment, divorce, deportation, illness, death, substance abuse, incarceration, or mental illness. Grandfamilies live in every area in the country, and represent all income levels, all races, and all ethnicities. Currently, more than 2.4 million children are being raised by grandparents, other relatives, or close family friends without the children's parents in the home. This represents three percent of all children in the United States.[2] While these families are present in all regions of the country, Delaware, Kentucky, Louisiana, and West Virginia have the highest percentages of children in kinship care[3] with 6 percent. These states are followed by Alabama, Mississippi, New Mexico, South Carolina and South Dakota with 5 percent.[4]

Children living with grandparents are more likely to be living in poverty. One in four children who live with their grandparents are poor (25 percent) compared to one in five children living with their parents (20 percent). Children raised solely by their grandmothers are most likely to be poor with almost half of them living in poverty (48 percent).[5]

Grandfamilies are found within and outside the child welfare system. Children who are placed with relatives in the foster care system account for 27 percent of all children in the system, up from 23 percent in 2003.[6] For every child being raised by a relative in the foster care system, 23 children are being raised by relatives outside of the system with no parent present in the home.[7] By conservative estimates, these relatives who keep families together and children out of foster care, save taxpayers more than $4 billion each year.[8]

Grandfamilies or kinship families are families in which children reside with and are being raised by grandparents, other extended family members, and adults with whom they have a close family-like relationship, such as godparents and close family friends.

Who are the Caregivers in Grandfamilies?

Grandparents or other relatives often take on the care of children with little or no chance to plan in advance. Consequently, they typically face unique challenges. Many caregivers lack a legal relationship to the children and cannot access educational enrollment, school services, or health care on their behalf. Others may have a legal relationship, but taking on sudden caregiving responsibilities often means they do not have suitable housing. Caregivers are also often in their prime retirement savings years and rather than save for their retirement, they find themselves providing for their grandchildren. For retired caregivers, they may not have the finances to take on the many extra expenses of raising children. Sixteen percent of children have a kinship caregiver who is already retired.[9]

Nearly 2.7 million grandparents report they are responsible for most of their grandchildren's basic needs, which is one out of every 24 grandparents in the United States.[10] Over one in five of these grandparents live below the poverty line.[11] Fifty-eight percent are still in the workforce and almost a quarter are disabled.[12] When compared to grandparents who are not living with their grandchildren, grandparent caregivers are more like to be living in poverty, more likely to be working at least part time, and more likely to be disabled.[13] Adding to the stress, grandparents often care for the children for extended periods of time; 40 percent report that they have been responsible for the children for more than five years.[14] They are also more than twice as likely to face the threat of hunger than older adults who do not live with their grandchildren.[15]

How Do Children, Youth and Caregivers in Grandfamilies Fare?

Despite these challenges, research confirms that children fare well in the care of their relatives. Compared to children in non-relative care, they have more stability, are more likely to maintain connections with brothers and sisters and preserve their cultural heritage and community bonds.[16] Caregivers also report experiencing benefits, such as having an increased sense of purpose in life, and birth parents may value that their children remain connected to family and friends.

What Kinds of Supports are Available to Grandfamilies?

Federal and state benefits including Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), housing and child care assistance, Medicaid, Children's Health Insurance Program, Social Security and Medicare are critical to many grandfamilies. Tax benefits, including the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), can also be important sources of support. However, despite these supports and benefits, the majority of grandfamilies do not receive the financial help or other benefits they are eligible for and many caregivers are unaware that government supports even exist.[17]

Additionally community-based programs such as support groups, kinships navigators, financial literacy, and respite care have produced positive outcomes for children, caregivers and the families as a whole. Research shows that programs like these can reduce costs, increase permanency and stability for children and youth, result in fewer days in child welfare custody and lower rates of foster care re-entry, reduce behavioral problems of children and youth, and increase caregiver strengths.[18]

Conclusion

Our nation benefits tremendously from the sacrifices grandfamilies have made to keep their families intact. From athletes and celebrities to business leaders, from recent college graduates to the President of the United States, individuals raised in grandfamilies contribute immeasurably to the health and welfare of our nation. We hope you will join with us to recognize, support and honor them.

STACEY WALKER

Stacey Walker was four, his little sister Cymone just one when their mother was murdered in Buffalo, New York. With no father in the picture, the siblings were facing an uncertain life at the hands of child authorities until their grandmother, Shirley Martin, made the choice to take them in.

It was a tumultuous time for everyone. The children had lost their mother, Ms. Martin had lost a daughter, and all were grieving. After bringing the children from Buffalo to her home in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, Ms. Martin had to confront a daunting reality: how to provide for two young children on a nurse aide's salary. Truth was, she was nearing the end of her career—she was well into her 50's—and she worked the night shift. Money had always been tight, but now she needed to hire a babysitter to look after her grandchildren while she worked at one of two hospitals in town.

"Things were tough psychologically for my grandmother," explains Stacey. "Here she was trying to come to grips with the murder of her daughter and adjusting to the fact that she would once again assume a parenting role for two very young kids."

"Things were tough financially, as well. My grandmother already lived in a government housing project, and although her salary had been enough to keep her afloat, she now had all sorts of new expenses: clothes, food, toys—all the basics any young child needs, multiplied by two."

"I was always quite different from other kids in my neighborhood," Stacey notes. "I had several interests, including sports, music, and debate. Those things cost money; money we didn't have."

"She made a lot of sacrifices for us, and ended up retiring early so she could raise us. She had to buy a car to get us from place to place, another added expense. Before we arrived, my grandmother would walk to and from work." Stacey recalls "We barely made it financially."

Stacey remembers that his grandmother never complained and tackled her new situation the way she always had—with strength and determination.

The GRAND SUCCESS

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Grandparents live with their grandchildren

MILLION

Grandparents who live with their grandchildren are the head of the household

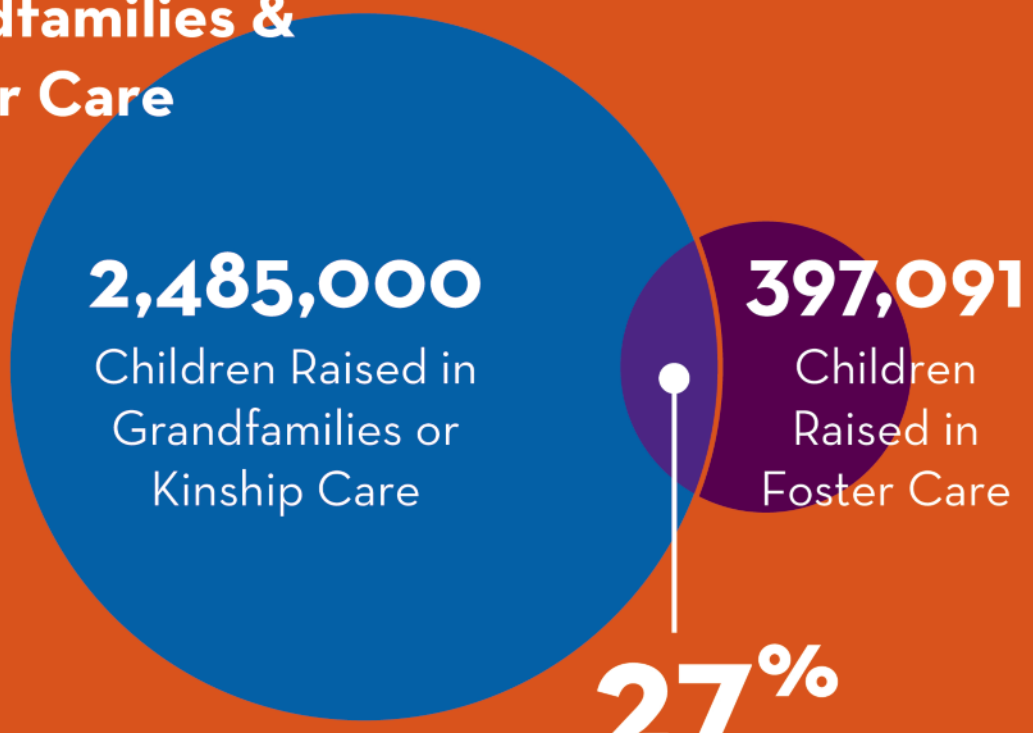
BILLION

amount **grandparents** and other relatives save taxpayers each year by raising children and keeping them out of foster care

MILLION

Children live in grandfamilies, where grandparents or other relatives are the householders

Grandfamilies & Foster Care



27%

(108,822)

of Children in Foster Care are Raised in **Grandfamilies** or Kinship Care

Grandparents Responsible for Grandchildren

2.7 MILLION

Grandparents are responsible for grandchildren

58 PERCENT

of them are in the workforce

21 PERCENT

of them live below the poverty line

40 PERCENT

of them have provided care for more than 5 years

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Policy Recommendations

Prioritize Family Care: Prioritize family-based care with relatives when it is necessary to remove children and youth from their parents.

- **Offer guidance to ensure immediate assessment and engagement of relatives as placements or other supports for children and youth:** States and tribes should develop clear processes, using family finding strategies and family team meetings, which include involving family members as supports to children even when those relatives are not available as placement resources.
- **Eliminate barriers to timely screening of potential relative caregivers:** Congress should call for the creation of a national child abuse and neglect database or promote timely, no-cost, adequate interstate and intrastate information sharing.
- **Reduce the use of group care and reinvest savings to support families:** Congress needs to restrict reimbursement for the use of non-treatment-oriented group care and call for funds to be reinvested to recruit and support therapeutic kin.

Empower Children, Youth and Caregiver Voices: Children and youth have opportunities to be full participants in their case plans and caregivers have rights to make decisions for children and youth in their care.

- **Seek and consider the input of children and youth in their placement decisions:** When children are removed from their parents' care, caseworkers should seek and consider the input of children in both the initial and subsequent placement decisions.
- **Provide health care and educational consent/authorization for caregivers:** States should enact educational and health care consent/authorization laws. These laws provide grandparents and other relatives raising children with the right to consent to health care and educational plans and activities for children in their day-to-day care, regardless of legal custody.

Support Families: Children, youth and families have the support and services they need to be stable and successful.

- **Coordinate and enhance support services for children and youth in relative care:** Congress should provide federal incentives or other investments in ongoing, evaluated support services for relative caregiver families, such as kinship navigator programs and post-guardianship, post-adoption and post-reunifications services. States must coordinate with relevant aging programs and should be encouraged to use the full allowable amount of National Family Caregiver Support Program funds to serve relative caregivers.
- **Evaluate and collect data on kinship diversion and prevention models:** Congress needs to support evaluated demonstration programs that keep children and youth out of foster care and safe within their birth or extended families when appropriate. Congress should further require states and tribes to collect data on the numbers of children who are being diverted to relatives and away from foster care and other child welfare services.
- **Preserve existing flexible funding sources:** Congress should protect flexible resources, such as the Social Services Block Grant (SSBG) and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), which states and tribes can use to supplement otherwise unavailable or fragmented services for extended family members caring for their related children.

Prepare Caregivers: Caregivers are prepared and able to meet the specific needs of children and youth in their care.

- **Address unnecessary barriers to licensure:** States and tribes should review their family foster home licensing standards for unnecessary barriers to licensing safe and appropriate families and report on steps they have taken to address those barriers. As a resource, HHS recommends the model family foster home licensing standards created by the National Association for Regulatory Administration, Generations United and the American Bar Association Center on Children and the Law, with support from the Annie E. Casey Foundation.
- **Improve access to appropriate training:** States and tribes need to make training options for foster and kinship foster parents available to kinship families who are raising children outside of the formal foster care system. Furthermore, child welfare agencies should develop and/or implement kinship foster care training that is designed with the unique experiences and perspectives of kinship families in mind.

Five Ways You Can Help Grandfamilies

1. **Raise awareness** about the successes of children and youth who are raised by grandparents or other relatives by sharing this publication and Grand Successes available at www.gu.org/RESOURCES/Publications/GrandSuccesses.aspx
2. **Sign up** at www.gu.org to receive alerts from Generations United about grandfamilies' policies, resources, and news and use your knowledge to raise awareness of grandfamilies, their needs and strengths.
3. **Contact your elected officials.** Tell them why they should support grandfamilies.
4. **Monitor your local paper** for articles about grandfamilies and children and youth in foster care. Write letters to the editor about the importance of supporting children and youth who are raised in grandfamilies.
5. **Encourage community policies** and business practices that give full family benefits and targeted support to grandfamilies. Some examples include:

- Promoting other policies that extend the definition of 'family' to include grandfamilies and other 'non-traditional' families. For example, ensuring that employee benefits extend to and include grandfamilies.
- Providing free or discounted admission to camps, parks, and entertainment events for grandfamilies.
- Offering free or low-cost space where grandfamily groups can hold support groups or informational meetings.
- Paying tribute to grandfamilies with city proclamations, awareness raising events, awards and other recognitions. Grandparents Day (www.grandparentsday.org) is one holiday to organize activities around.
- Connecting with local support programs. Ask how you can help. Many groups can use volunteers, fundraisers or donations of supplies.

Resources

Generations United's National Center on Grandfamilies is a leading voice for issues affecting families headed by grandparents and other relatives. www.gu.org.

The Grandfamilies State Law and Policy Resource Center serves as a national legal resource in support of grandfamilies within and outside the child welfare system. www.grandfamilies.org

GrandFacts are state fact sheets for grandfamilies that provide state-specific data, information and helpful links. www.grandfactsheets.org

Advocates for Families First works to build a unified national movement in support of kinship, foster, and adoptive families who care for children and youth. www.advocatesforfamiliesfirst.org

The Relatives as Parents Program (RAPP) a major initiative of The Brookdale Foundation Group, promotes the creation or expansion of services for grandfamilies. www.brookdalefoundation.org

LYNN URVINA

Lynn Urvina first learned she had an 11-month old granddaughter, Tara, when Tara's mother applied for TANF and listed her son as a possible father. A DNA test confirmed the relationship, but Lynn knew this baby was family the second she laid eyes on her.

Lynn and her husband felt that Tara was living in very dangerous conditions and begged child protective services (CPS) to investigate. A CPS worker suggested they apply for non-parental custody of Tara. They did so immediately.

When eleven-month-old Tara arrived at Lynn's house her head was shaved and infected with scabies. Her mother's roommates had shaved the baby's head to get rid of lice. In the process, they cut her head in several places. Although concerning, those wounds soon healed. What took much longer to heal were the internal wounds. Lynn believes nighttime must have been a scary time for Tara as an infant. She could not sleep through the night, waking Lynn and her husband in the middle of the night until she was 8 years old. When they adopted Tara, this stopped.

Lynn knew they could not do this alone and began attending a Kinship Support Group when Tara was two and a half. One evening there was a presentation from a local Kinship Navigator Program, a resource that provides information, referral, and follow-up to grandparents and other relatives raising children to link them to the benefits and services that they or the children need. The staff person giving the presentation mentioned she was leaving and Lynn knew she wanted that job.

As the Kinship Navigator, Lynn helps grandfamilies navigate confusing court systems, work with CPS, and advocate for children in schools, and/or with medical and mental health issues. She also facilitates the Washington State Kinship Caregiver Support Program for her service area. This program assists low-income kinship caregivers, providing small grants to help with the financial burden of raising related children.

"The need for emotional support can be greater for many families than the need for financial resources," explains Lynn. "I work with my agency, Family Education and Support Services, to organize support groups for grandfamilies. The children are able to play and form friendships with children in like circumstances while the adults can support and encourage each other."

"Tara is the reason I have found a job that I love," shares Lynn. "My experiences with her help me understand what other families are going through. They know that I have been through many of the situations they are facing and it helps me communicate with them on a level that would not otherwise be possible."

Tara is now eleven years old and is building a relationship with her father who is currently in jail. They write letters and Tara sends him drawings. Lynn describes her as a very caring young person and a joy to have in their home. Tara has a much brighter future today because Lynn and her husband stepped in to give her the unconditional love, support and home she needs and deserves.

Generations United's National Center on Grandfamilies is a leading voice for issues affecting families headed by grandparents and other relatives. Through the Center, Generations United leads an advisory group of organizations, caregivers and youth that set the national agenda to advance public will in support of these families. Center staff conduct federal advocacy and provide technical assistance to state level practitioners and advocates and trains grandfamilies to advocate for themselves. The Center raises awareness about the strengths and needs of the families through media outreach, weekly communications, and awareness raising events. It offers a broad range of guides, fact sheets and tools for grandfamilies, which cover issues from educational and health care access to financial and legal supports and can be found at www.gu.org.

Generations United's mission is to improve the lives of children, youth, and older adults through intergenerational collaboration, public policies and programs for the enduring benefit of all. For nearly 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.

Acknowledgements

Generations United gratefully acknowledges the following dedicated individuals and organizations whose work and support made this report possible: Stacey Walker and Lynn Urvina for sharing their stories and Generations United staff Sheri Steinig, Jaia Peterson Lent and Ana Beltran for authoring this report. We extend our gratitude to Verizon Foundation, Pfizer, The Brookdale Foundation Group, and Matz, Blancato and Associates whose support made this project possible.

Design and Layout: Marcia Delong, Delong Lithographics

Graphics: Kiel Mutschelknaus, KielM.com

Photo Credits: Brian Enriquez and Lynn Urvina. All other photos included in the publication are licensed stock photos.

Disclaimers

This report was funded in part by Verizon Foundation, Pfizer, The Brookdale Foundation Group, and Matz, Blancato and Associates. We thank them for their support but acknowledge that the ideas, findings, and conclusions presented in this report are those of the authors alone and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of these organizations.

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End Notes

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8. Generations United calculated this figure based on the federal share of the 2011 national average minimum monthly foster care maintenance payment ($301) for 1.1 million children. The number of children is approximately one-half of the children being raised in grandfamilies outside of the formal foster care system. We use this number in our calculation due to a conservative estimate that the other half already receives some type of governmental financial assistance, such as a Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) child-only grant. We also know that a number of children in grandfamilies have special needs that would warrant higher monthly foster care maintenance payments. The cost of 1.1 million children entering the system would represent all new financial outlays for taxpayers.
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