



The Challenges Faced by Grandparents Who Raise Grandchildren Alone

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Grandparents increasingly play a key role in the lives of their grandchildren, as revealed by recent research I have done with colleagues. But some of the most vulnerable families in this group are failing to receive the childrearing support that other families facing similar economic and social risks receive.

Between 2001 and 2012, the United States experienced a 30 percent increase in the proportion of children living with their parents and grandparents – children growing up in what scholars call “three-generation households.” Many Americans tried to cope with the stresses of the recent Great Recession by doubling up in order to conserve resources. In 2012, one of every ten U.S. children lived in a household with their grandparents (with eight percent living in three-generation households). Clearly, U.S. social policies to support the elderly also help millions of children – something that policymakers and citizens should keep in mind as changes in Social Security, Medicaid and Medicare, and other safety-net programs for the elderly are debated.

Grandparents who are raising their grandchildren with no parent in the household are especially likely to be ignored. Such families are often referred to as “grandfamilies.” Just one in 50 U.S. children is being reared in such a family. Notably, however, the proportion is closer to one in every 25 for Black children.

Characteristics of Grandfamilies

U.S. grandfamilies are, on average, quite economically disadvantaged.

- Nearly a third live below the federal poverty line, and almost another third have incomes less than 200 percent of the poverty level.
- Grandparents in such families are less likely than parents in other family structures to be employed and are less likely to be married.
- We see strikingly high levels of health problems in grandfamilies – not only health problems for the grandparents, but often mental health problems for the children, probably reflecting the misfortunes many have experienced in their lives.
- Grandfamilies are not usually able to benefit from financial help available to foster parents and often don't receive even the more modest welfare benefits to which they are entitled. Indeed, our research finds that only 12 percent of U.S. grandfamilies receive cash assistance, despite the fact that many more should be eligible for such payments.

Challenges for Grandfamilies

Grandfamilies often exist outside the reach of social service agencies, chiefly because relatives often arrange informally for grandparents to care for children, without calling for social workers or other agency officials to get involved.

- Almost half of our sample of children who were being raised by grandparents entered into the arrangement because the parent voluntarily gave up the child. Only a small proportion of parents made that decision because a social welfare agency got involved.
- Informal arrangements mean that grandparent caregivers usually lack legal custody rights – which, in turn, can mean that they lack the legal authority to make medical or school decisions for the child.

Grandparents can also face repeated court challenges if the parent tries to reclaim the child they are raising. Legal ambiguity can undermine both the security and parental authority of the grandparents.

The Special Strengths of Grandfamilies

Despite the many challenges they face, grandfamilies also have numerous strengths, as our interviews revealed.

- Grandparents are mature and experienced parents, because they have already raised children.
- Grandparents know the grandchildren's parents and often try to see the best in them, despite the mistakes those parents may have made in life. Bonds across the three generations can help children remain in touch with noncustodial parents.
- Many grandparents say that raising their grandchildren gives them renewed purpose in life, keeping them young and connected. And children themselves express a great deal of warmth and appreciation for the grandparents who raise them and keep them safe.

Better Support is Needed

The challenge for policymakers, practitioners, and researchers is to throw light on this form of childrearing and ensure that the supports put in place for other vulnerable families are made available to and adapted for the special needs of grandfamilies, an often overlooked group.

In America today, grandparents increasingly play a key role in the lives of their grandchildren, yet some of the most vulnerable three-generation families are failing to receive the childrearing support that other similarly at-risk families receive. That happens in part because researchers and policymakers have failed to gather enough specific information about the situations of these families and the specific obstacles and opportunities they face. Even though grandfamilies are relatively rare – more so than three-generation households – they are important caregivers, especially for many Black children. Their needs must be considered when programs for the elderly are changed – and those needs should also inform future efforts to improve support for many of the children who will build America's future.

Read more in Rachel Dunifon, "Grandparent Coresidence and Family Well-Being: Implications for Research and Policy," (with Kathleen Ziol-Guest and Kimberly Kopko). *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 654 (2014): 110-126.