

Kinship/Grandfamilies: Strengths and Challenges

FACT SHEET

Imagine you are a child. In the middle of the night, your mom drops you off at your grandma's house to live. Your mom and dad can't care for you anymore. Their alcohol use has made it impossible to parent. You're glad to be with your 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 your grandma get it for you? Will your mom and dad be okay?

Parental alcohol and other substance use is just one of the many reasons kinship/grandfamilies come together. Kinship/grandfamilies are families in which children reside with and are being raised by grandparents, other relatives, or other adults with whom they have a close family-like relationship (such as godparents or family friends). Other reasons kinship/grandfamilies form include parental military deployment, incarceration, mental or physical illness, deportation, and death. Whatever the cause, when parents are unable to care for their children, these caregivers often step in at a moment's notice to keep families together.

Kinship/grandfamilies have unique strengths and face unique challenges. Unlike parents, these caregivers do not have inherent legal rights and responsibilities with respect to the children they raise. They often take informal responsibility for children suddenly and have no time to plan for financial, housing, or other needs.



What does the research show about the strengths of kinship/grandfamilies?

Decades of research repeatedly confirms that children who cannot remain with their parents thrive when raised by relatives and close family friends. Children in foster care with relatives have more stable and safe childhoods than children in foster care with non-relatives, with a greater likelihood of having a permanent home. They experience fewer school changes, have better behavioral and mental health outcomes, and report that they “always felt loved.” They keep their connections to their siblings, their family and community, and their cultural identity. Moreover, children in foster care with relatives are less likely to re-enter the foster care system after returning to their birth parents. If returning to their parents is not possible, relatives tend to be willing to adopt or become permanent guardians. About 34% of all children adopted from foster care are adopted by relatives, and 12% of children who exit foster care exit into guardianships.¹

On top of the many benefits to children, caregivers report that they gain from their role, as well, often citing an increased sense of purpose. Birth parents may also value that their children remain connected to family and friends.²

“We have friends who are retired who are always telling me about their next cruise to Hawaii. I tell them I go on cruises every day. I cruise to school, I cruise to the doctor’s office, I cruise to the skateboarding park. Joey is my ‘cruise to Hawaii’ and you know what, I wouldn’t trade my cruise for theirs.”

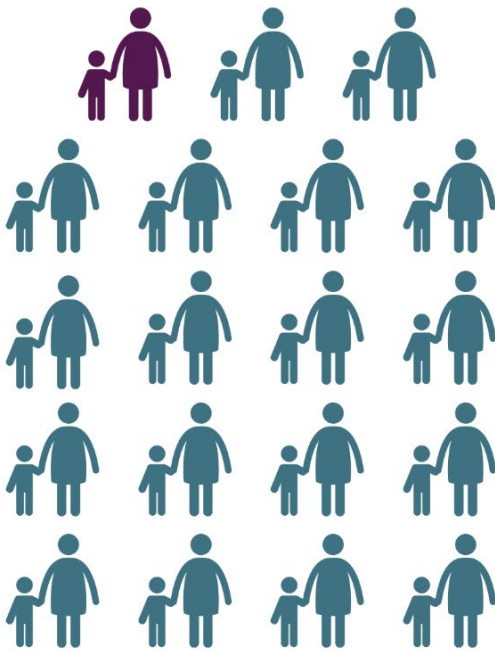
– Adrian Charniak, GRAND Voice caregiver advocate, Illinois

How many children live in kinship/grandfamilies?

- ▶ As of 2022, over 2.5 million children are being raised by a grandparent, other relative, or close family friend and do not have a parent living in the household.³
- ▶ There were 133,873 children in the legal custody of the child welfare system with relatives providing the care in 2021. These children represented over one-third of all children in foster care.⁴
- ▶ The percentage of children in foster care with relatives increased from 26% in 2010 to 35% in 2021.⁵
- ▶ For every one child in the foster care system with a relative providing the care, there are 18 children being raised by relatives outside that system.⁶

Children in Kinship/Grandfamilies

For every **1 child** being raised by kin in foster care, there are **18 children** being raised by kin outside of foster care



2.5 million

Number of children who are being raised by a relative or close family friend, with no parent living in the household

133,873

Number of children in foster care being raised by relatives

What do available data show about kinship/grandfamilies?

While kinship/grandfamilies include families in which grandparents, other relatives, or close family friends are caregivers, most of the demographic data publicly available are about families in which grandparents are head of the household (meaning that they own or rent the home) and are responsible for their grandchildren. Over 2.4 million grandparents are responsible for their grandchildren.⁷

Kinship/grandfamilies are racially and ethnically diverse

- ▶ About 54% of children whose grandparents are responsible for them are white, 25% are Black or African American, 23.8% are Latino or Hispanic, 2.2% are American Indian or Alaska Native, 1.6% are Asian, and 0.4% are Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander.⁸
- ▶ About 64% of grandparents responsible for their grandchildren are white, 20% are Black or African American, 19.5% are Latino or Hispanic, 2.2% are American Indian or Alaska Native, 3.6% are Asian, and 0.3% are Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander.⁹
- ▶ Due to past and present injustice and inequities and strong cultural traditions of extended family support, Black, American Indian, and Alaska Native children and grandparents are more likely to live in grandfamilies than the general population of children and grandparents.
- ▶ **Technical assistance tip:** To provide culturally appropriate services to kinship/grandfamilies who are Black, American Indian/Alaska Native, and Latino, consult [racial equity toolkits](#) aimed at service providers.

Children in kinship/grandfamilies are more likely to be poor than children in other families

- ▶ About 30% of children whose grandparents are responsible for them and who have no parent in the home are living in poverty, as compared to 18% of children in the general population.¹⁰
- ▶ In 2012, 48% of children who lived with a grandmother only and had no parents in the home lived in poverty, and, due to historical and current inequities, a disproportionate percentage, 42%, of these children were Black.¹¹ Although these national data are ten years old, anecdotal, and other limited geographic data show that these disparities continue.
- ▶ **Technical assistance tip:** Kin/grandfamily caregivers often need additional financial resources to meet the needs of children they did not plan or expect to raise. Program examples from other states may be of help – [contact our team](#).

Members of kinship/grandfamilies are all ages

- ▶ Approximately 37% of children living with grandparents who are responsible for them are under 6 years old, nearly 34% are between the ages of 6 and 11, and almost 29% are between ages 12 and 17.¹²
- ▶ Over 45% of all grandparents responsible for their grandchildren are age 60 and older, and about 54% are between ages 30 and 59.¹³
- ▶ **Technical assistance tip:** With partners ZERO TO THREE and USAging, the [Network](#) can help you design policies and programs to support kinship/grandfamilies of all ages.

Most grandparent caregivers are in the labor force

- ▶ Nearly 56% of grandparents responsible for their grandchildren are in the labor force.¹⁴
- ▶ **Technical assistance tip:** Since most grandparent caregivers are still in the work force, childcare programs, including before- and after-school activities, need to be considered for these families. Examples of effective programs are available from the Network at www.GKSNetwork.org.

Grandparent caregivers are more likely than parents to have a disability

- ▶ Nearly 25% of grandparents responsible for their grandchildren have a disability, compared to about 10% of parents of children under age 18.¹⁵
- ▶ Kinship navigator programs play a critical role in providing information on the range of services that may be available to kinship/grandfamilies; these programs should keep in mind the large number of grandparent caregivers with disabilities when serving the families.
- ▶ **Technical assistance tip:** The Network has a [list](#) of all known kinship navigator programs around the United States.

Grandparents and the grandchildren they raise live together for a long time

- ▶ Over 61% of grandparents responsible for their grandchildren have raised them for at least three years, and more than 45% have raised their grandchildren for five or more years.¹⁶
- ▶ **Technical assistance tip:** Because it is a long relationship, stable housing, educational access, and other services must be developed and delivered for kinship/grandfamilies. Examples of effective services are available at www.GKSNetwork.org.

What challenges do kinship/grandfamilies face?

Available data and research have helped uncover the challenges faced by kinship/grandfamilies, as well as their strengths.

Legal

Legal issues are frequently among the top concerns for kinship/grandfamilies:

- ▶ Unlike parents, kin/grandfamily caregivers do not have automatic legal rights and responsibilities with respect to the children they raise.
- ▶ The process of obtaining a legal relationship with the children – such as adoption, legal custody, or guardianship – is usually expensive and 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.

- ▶ **Technical assistance tip:** The Network hosted a webinar on the array of legal relationships available to the families; a recording and associated resources are available on the [webpage for the webinar](#).

Financial

Having additional children in the household typically requires additional income or resources, but available ongoing assistance to help meet these children's needs is often inadequate and inequitable:

- ▶ Children in foster care with unrelated caregivers receive monthly foster care maintenance payments, but most children in foster care with kin/grandfamily caregivers do not receive these payments.
- ▶ Children in the care of kin/grandfamily caregivers are often referred to child-only Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) grants as the only source of ongoing financial support. There are many access issues in getting these grants, and they are typically much smaller than foster care maintenance payments and only increase incrementally for each child.
- ▶ **Technical assistance tip:** The Network's legal relationship webinar also featured a discussion of the array of public benefits and financial supports available to the families; a recording and associated resources are available on the [webpage for the webinar](#).

Physical and Mental Health

Both the caregivers and the children in these families face physical and mental health issues to a greater degree than the general population:

- ▶ Children being raised by kin/grandfamily caregivers 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 their caregiver's home.
- ▶ Kin/grandfamily caregivers are often socially isolated from their peers and may feel guilt and shame about their adult relative or friend who is unable to parent, especially if it is their own adult child.
- ▶ **Technical assistance tip:** You may widely share these free-of-charge [tip sheets](#) – one on caregiver self-care and the other on youth mental health – with the caregivers you serve.

"Growing up with a childhood full of trauma and abuse, there were very few moments where I felt safe and very few people with whom I felt protected. Being put into my uncle's care was the best decision that could have ever been made for me. It wasn't an easy road by any means, but I have no doubt in that it completely saved my life."

– Kindra, raised by her uncle, California

Housing

Kin/grandfamily caregivers often begin caring for children without warning or preparation, and they face unique problems with respect to housing:

- ▶ Many kin/grandfamily caregivers live in small apartments and houses that are not suitable for children.
- ▶ Caregivers living in public senior housing with children may be wrongfully evicted because of the children.
- ▶ The presence of children may violate private lease agreements.
- ▶ If 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.
- ▶ **Technical assistance tip:** At least 18 grandfamily-specific housing developments exist around the country. To learn more about Bridge Meadows in Oregon, visit its [webpage in the Network Resource Library](#).

Education

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

- ▶ Children may be denied school enrollment if their kin/grandfamily caregivers do not have guardianship or legal custody.
- ▶ Grandparents, other relatives, and close family friends acting as parents may have difficulty being included as participants in the Individual Education Plan (IEP) process for children with disabilities.
- ▶ **Technical assistance tip:** Jurisdictions can leverage the McKinney Vento federal law to gain enrollment access and educational services for children who are being raised by their kin without court or child welfare involvement. See [the Network Resource Library webpage](#) and download a presentation slide deck from a professional in Washington State to learn more.

Conclusion

As an aid towards improving public knowledge about kinship/grandfamilies, the Grandfamilies & Kinship Support Network – the first national technical assistance center on kinship/grandfamilies, built and run through a cooperative agreement with the Administration for Community Living – has updated this long-standing resource of Generations United. The previous version was funded by the Brookdale Foundation Group, and we thank them for their support. You are welcome to link to this resource, download it, freely distribute it, and use it.

Additional Resources

- ▶ www.GKSNetwork.org – A resource library with materials to help the many government systems and community nonprofits working to support kinship/grandfamilies
- ▶ www.gu.org – Resources and publications on kinship/grandfamilies, including Generations United’s annual State of Grandfamilies Reports
- ▶ www.grandfamilies.org – A comprehensive website for publications, materials, and laws impacting kinship/grandfamilies both inside and outside the foster care system

The Grandfamilies & Kinship Support Network: A National Technical Assistance Center (Network) helps government agencies and nonprofits in states, tribes, and territories work across jurisdictional and systemic boundaries to improve supports and services for families in which grandparents, other relatives, or close family friends are raising children whose parents are unable to do so. For more information, please visit www.GKSNetwork.org.

For almost twenty-five years, Generations United’s National Center on Grandfamilies has been a leading voice for families headed by grandparents, other relatives, and close family friends. Center staff conduct federal advocacy, train grandfamilies to advocate for themselves, and create an annual State of Grandfamilies Report. Those reports and other resources can be found at www.gu.org and www.grandfamilies.org.

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ENDNOTES

¹ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Children's Bureau. 2022. "The AFCARS report, Preliminary FY 2021 Estimates (No. 29)." Accessed November 2022.

<https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/cb/afcars-report-29.pdf>

Please note that there are limitations with AFCARS data and children in relative foster care may be underrepresented. See www.gksnetwork.org/kinship-data/ for an explanation of the data limitations.

² Hartwell-Walker, Marie. 2015. "Challenges and Benefits for Grandparent Caregivers." *Psych Central*. Accessed February 2020. <http://psychcentral.com/lib/challenges-and-benefits-for-grandparent-caregivers>

³ Annie E. Casey Foundation Kids Count Data Center. 2020-2022. "Children in kinship care in the United States." Accessed October 2022. <https://datacenter.kidscount.org/data/tables/10455-children-in-kinship-care?loc=1&loct=2#detailed/1/any/false/2479/any/20160,20161>

⁴ See endnote 1

⁵ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Children's Bureau. 2011. "The AFCARS report, Preliminary FY 2008 Estimates (No. 18)." Accessed March 2022.

<https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/report/afcars-report-18>; and "The AFCARS report, Preliminary FY 2021 Estimates (No. 29)." Accessed November 2022.

<https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/cb/afcars-report-29.pdf>

⁶ See www.gksnetwork.org/kinship-data/ for an explanation of this data calculation.

⁷ U.S. Census Bureau. "Table S1002 – Grandparents, 2020 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates." Accessed March 2022.

<https://data.census.gov/cedsci/table?q=S1002%3A%20GRANDPARENTS&tid=ACSST5Y2020.S1002>

⁸ U.S. Census Bureau. "Table S1001 – Grandchildren Characteristics, 2020 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates." Accessed March 2022.

<https://data.census.gov/cedsci/table?q=S1001&tid=ACSST5Y2020.S1001> Similar data are not publicly available for other relatives and family friends.

⁹ See endnote 5.

¹⁰ See endnote 6.

¹¹ See endnote 6.

¹² See endnote 6.

¹³ See endnote 5.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.; and National Research Center for Parents with Disabilities. 2018. "Parents With and Without Disabilities: Demographics, Material Hardship, and Program Participation." Accessed April 2022.

<https://heller.brandeis.edu/parents-with-disabilities/data-hub/additional-resources/parents-with-without-disabilities.html>

¹⁶ U.S. Census Bureau. "Table B10050 – Grandparents Living with Own Grandchildren Under 18 Years by Responsibility for Own Grandchildren by Length of Time Responsible for Own Grandchildren for the Population 30 Years and Over, 2020 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates." Accessed April 2022.

<https://data.census.gov/cedsci/table?q=B10050%3A%20GRANDPARENTS%20LIVING%20WITH%20OWN%20GRANDCHILDREN%20UNDER%2018%20YEARS%20BY%20RESPONSIBILITY%20FOR%20OWN%20GRANDCHILDREN%20BY%20LENGTH%20OF%20TIME%20RESPONSIBLE%20FOR%20OWN%20GRANDCHILDREN%20FOR%20THE%20POPULATION%2030%20YEARS%20AND%20OVER&tid=ACSST5Y2020.B10050> Similar data not publicly available for other relatives and family friends.