

# FACT SHEET Grandfamilies: Strengths and Challenges

## Introduction

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



### Children Thrive in Grandfamilies

Parental substance use is just one of the many reasons that cause grandfamilies to come together. Grandfamilies (or kinship families) are families where 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 grandfamilies form include parental military deployment, incarceration, mental or physical illness, 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.

Grandfamilies face unique strengths and challenges. Unlike parents, grandfamily caregivers do not have inherent legal rights and responsibilities with respect to these children. They often take informal responsibility for children suddenly and have no planning time to meet their financial, housing or other needs.

## How Many Children Live in Grandfamilies?

Over 7.9 million children in the United States live with a relative who is head of the household<sup>1</sup>:

- Over 6 million of these children live with grandparent householders, and another 1.8 million live with other relative householders, such as aunts or uncles.<sup>2</sup>
- About 2.7 million children are being raised by a grandparent, other relative or close family friend and do not have a parent living in the household.<sup>3</sup>
- 139,004 children are in the legal custody of the child welfare system with relatives providing the care.<sup>4</sup> This represents almost one-third of all children in foster care.<sup>5</sup>
- The percentage of children in foster care with relatives has increased from 24% in 2008 to 32% in 2018.<sup>6</sup>
- For every one child in the foster care system with a relative providing the care, there are 19 children outside the system with a relative.<sup>7</sup>

## What Does Available Data Show About These Grandfamilies?

While grandfamilies include families where grandparents, other relatives or close family friends are caregivers, most of the demographic data available is about families in which grandparents are the householders and are responsible for their grandchildren. Over 2.4 million grandparents are responsible for their grandchildren.<sup>8</sup>

The data show these millions of grandfamilies span the racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, and geographic spectrum.

### Grandfamilies are racially and ethnically diverse

- About 58% of children whose grandparents are responsible for them are white, 27% are black or African American, 3% are American Indian and Alaska Native, 1% is Asian and 17% are Latino or Hispanic.<sup>9</sup>
- As for the grandparents responsible for their grandchildren, about 66% of grandparents responsible for their grandchildren are white, 19% are black or African American, 2% are American Indian and Alaska Native, 4% are Asian, and 20% are Latino or Hispanic.<sup>10</sup>
- 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.

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

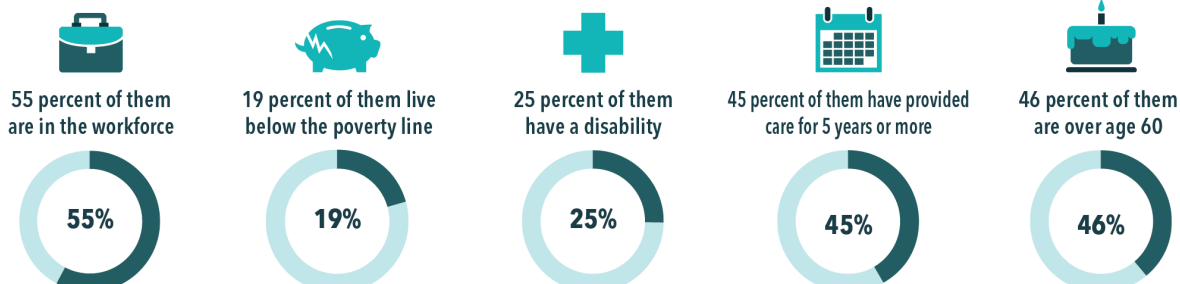
- About 30% of children whose grandparents are responsible for them and have no parent in the home are living in poverty, as compared to 18% of children in the general population.<sup>11</sup>
- Almost half, 48%, of children who lived with a grandmother-only and no parents in the home lived in poverty in 2012.<sup>12</sup> These children were disproportionately black, 42%.<sup>13</sup>
- Approximately 19% of all grandparent householders responsible for their grandchildren are living in poverty.<sup>14</sup>
- Without the time to plan for children they did not expect to raise, grandfamily caregivers typically need additional financial resources to meet the children's needs.

### Grandfamilies are all ages

- 37% of children living with grandparents who are responsible for them are under 6 years old, 34% are between the ages of 6 and 11, and 29% are between ages 12 to 17.<sup>15</sup>
- About 46% of all grandparents responsible for their grandchildren are age 60 and older, and about 54% are between ages 30 and 59.<sup>16</sup>
- Policies and program to support grandfamilies should be designed to serve families of all ages.

## GRANDPARENTS RESPONSIBLE FOR GRANDCHILDREN (2018)

*2,400,000 Grandparents are responsible for grandchildren*



## Most grandparent caregivers are in the labor force

- Over 55% of grandparents responsible for their grandchildren are in the labor force.<sup>17</sup>
- Since most caregivers are age 60 and under and still in the work force, childcare and before and after school activities must be considered for these families.

## Grandparent caregivers are more likely than parents to have a disability

- Roughly 25% of grandparents responsible for their grandchildren have a disability compared to about 6% of parents of children under age 18.<sup>18</sup>
- Kinship navigator programs play a critical role in providing information on the range of services that may be available to grandfamilies; these programs should keep in mind the large number of grandparent caregivers with disabilities when serving the families.

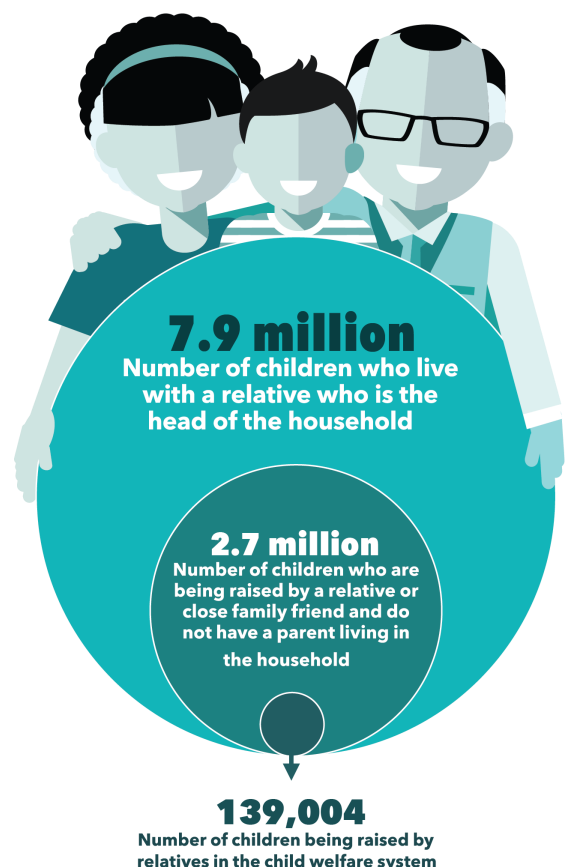
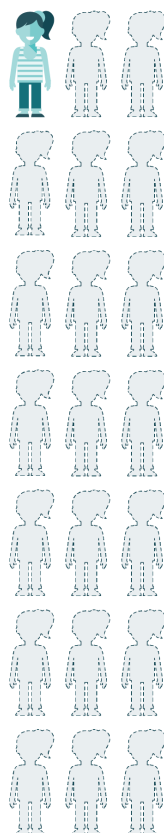
## Grandfamilies live together for a long time

- Over 60% of grandparents responsible for their grandchildren have raised them for at least three years, and about 45% have raised their grandchildren for five or more years.<sup>19</sup>
- Because it is a long relationship, stable housing, educational access and other services must be developed and delivered with grandfamilies in mind.

## Most grandfamily caregivers own their home

- Although about 60% of grandparents and other relatives raising children own their home, they still face challenges.<sup>20</sup> Caregivers' homes may not be big enough, maintained or child proofed to accommodate children.
- Less than one-third of income eligible grandfamilies receive housing assistance.<sup>21</sup>
- Policymakers should ensure that housing programs are available to grandfamilies to do home repairs, modifications and add bedrooms and bathrooms at an affordable cost.<sup>22</sup>

For every **1** child in foster care with relatives there are **19** children being raised by grand-parents or other relatives outside of the foster care system.



## What Does the Research Show About Grandfamilies' Strengths?

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 greater likelihood of getting 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 brothers and sisters, 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 birth parents.<sup>23</sup> If returning to parents is not possible, relatives are willing to adopt or become permanent guardians. In fact, about 36% of all children adopted from foster care are adopted by relatives and 11% of children who exit foster care, exit into guardianships with relatives.<sup>24</sup>

In addition to the many benefits to children, grandfamily caregivers report benefiting from providing this care, often citing an increased sense of purpose. Birth parents may also value that their children remain connected to family and friends.

**"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*

## What Challenges Do Grandfamilies Face?

Over the past twenty years, available data and research have helped uncover grandfamilies' challenges, as well as their strengths. 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:

- Unlike parents, grandfamily caregivers do not have legal rights and responsibilities with respect to these children without either going to court, acting on a power of attorney that the parents have given them or completing an educational and health care consent affidavit if their jurisdiction has one.
- 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.
- Unlike parents and children in child welfare cases, relative caregivers are not typically provided with free legal counsel.
- Private attorneys may be unaffordable, and other existing legal resources – such as legal aid, law school clinics, and lawyers for the elderly – may be unknown.

- Kinship navigator programs help link caregivers with legal and other resources, but most states and tribes do not have jurisdiction wide programs yet. Once fully implemented, the Family First Prevention Services Act of 2018 will provide for ongoing federal reimbursement for these programs.
- The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 gave states and tribes 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 licensed relative. About 15 states still need to act on this opportunity to provide another viable permanency option for children.<sup>25</sup>
- Other creative legal options, such as standby guardianship laws and de facto custody laws, do not exist in all states.
- Secondary planning is critical so that plans for the children are in place in the event of caregiver's death or disability.

## Financial

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

- Children in foster care with unrelated caregivers receive ongoing monthly foster care maintenance payments, whereas most children in foster care with grandfamily caregivers do not receive these payments. According to analysts at the Chronicle of Social Change, about 108,426 children in the legal custody of the child welfare agency with grandfamily caregivers do not receive a foster care payment.<sup>26</sup>
- Children in the care of 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 rise incrementally for each child.
- Children may receive Social Security survivor or disability benefits, but that can prevent them from receiving TANF and other public benefits.

**National Comparison Chart - Financial Support<sup>27</sup>**

Outside the Foster Care System or Unlicensed Kinship Foster Care <i>Temporary Assistance for Needy Families child-only grants</i>	Licensed Kinship Foster Care <i>Foster Care Maintenance Payments</i>	Kinship Guardianship and Adoption Assistance <i>Guardianship or Adoption Assistance</i>
<b>One child</b> National average <b>\$249/month</b> Typically must apply separately for Medicaid	<b>One child</b> National average of minimum foster care maintenance payments is <b>\$511/month</b> Automatic Medicaid	<b>One child</b> Up to the foster care rate. Based on the minimum payment, <b>\$511/month</b> Automatic Medicaid
<b>Two children</b> National average <b>\$344/month</b> Typically must apply separately for Medicaid	<b>Two children</b> National average of minimum foster care maintenance payments is <b>\$1022/month</b> Automatic Medicaid	<b>Two children</b> Up to the foster care rate. Based on the minimum payment, <b>\$1022/month</b> Automatic Medicaid
<b>Three children</b> National average <b>\$423/month</b> Typically must apply separately for Medicaid	<b>Three children</b> National average of minimum foster care maintenance payments is <b>\$1533/month</b> Automatic Medicaid	<b>Three children</b> Up to the foster care rate. Based on the minimum payment, <b>\$1533/month</b> Automatic Medicaid

\*National averages are from 2011 GAO report at <https://www.gao.gov/assets/590/585649.pdf>

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## Physical and Mental Health

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

- 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.<sup>28</sup>
- Grandfamily caregivers are often socially isolated from their peers and may have feelings of guilt and shame about their adult children who are unable to parent.
- They may be experiencing grief related to the loss of a child's parent, expectations for their own retirement or the cherished role of a traditional grandparent.
- Grandfamily caregivers are frequently unable to attend to their own health care needs due to a lack of daycare, respite care or adequate health care insurance.
- Supportive services – such as caregiver support groups, respite, and counseling – help the families cope with their physical and mental health issues. The National Family Caregiver Support Program federally funds Area Agencies on Aging (AAAs) to help grandparents and other older relatives age 55+ raising children in addition to other family caregivers.

## Housing

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

- Many grandfamily caregivers live on fixed incomes and/or in small apartments and houses that are not suitable for children.
- The caregivers may no longer be able to afford their apartments or houses after assuming the extra expenses of raising children.
- 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 grandfamily 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 grandfamily 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.

**“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*

## Conclusion

Policies and programs at the federal, state, and local levels should encourage, rather than discourage, the responsible actions of grandfamily caregivers who step forward to take care of children who cannot be raised by their parents. 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 about grandfamilies, Generations United has created this fact sheet to freely distribute and use as a resource.

Led and inspired by our GRAND Voices national network of caregiver advocates, and in partnership with other advocates and policy makers, Generations United will continue to work to improve the lives of children and adults in these “grand” families.

## Additional Resources

[www.gu.org](http://www.gu.org) – Resources and publications on grandfamilies, including Generations United’s annual State of Grandfamilies reports.

[www.grandfamilies.org](http://www.grandfamilies.org) – A comprehensive one-stop national website for publications, materials and laws impacting grandfamilies both inside and outside the foster care system for all 50 states and the District of Columbia.

[www.grandfactsheets.org](http://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.

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For over twenty years, **Generations United's National Center on Grandfamilies** has been a leading voice for families headed by grandparents, other relatives and close family friends. Through the Center, Generations United leads an advisory group of organizations, caregivers and youth that sets the national agenda to advance public will in support of these families. Center staff conduct federal advocacy, provide technical assistance to state-level practitioners and advocates, and train 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](http://www.gu.org) and [www.grandfamilies.org](http://www.grandfamilies.org).

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