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Grandparents as primary carers of their grandchildren

Policy and practice insights from research

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GRANDPARENTS HAVE LONG PLAYED a major role in the lives of their children and grandchildren, with some providing extensive emotional, material and practical support. In the last quarter of the 20th century, in Australia as in many other countries, grandparent carers became both politically organised and a focus of policy attention (Arber & Timonen, 2012; Fitzpatrick & COTA National Seniors, 2003; Glaser et al., 2010). The growing public visibility of grandparent carers reflects not only their own political mobilisation but also the increasing reliance of child protection authorities on kinship care. In Australia, almost half of all children placed in home-based care by child protection authorities are placed with relatives or kin, mainly grandparents (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [AIHW], 2012).

Grandparents become primary carers of their grandchildren in one of three main ways: (a) following a parenting order made by the Family Court or Federal Circuit Court;¹ (b) following application by a state or territory government to the Children's Court for care and protection orders that results in a court order that the child lives with his or her grandparents; and (c) through informal arrangements that may or may not have the agreement of the parents and may or may not involve the state child protection authorities.

This chapter reports the key findings of a project led by researchers from the University of New South Wales.² The study, funded by the Australian Research Council, was con-

1 In April 2013 the Federal Magistrates Court of Australia was re-named the Federal Circuit Court of Australia.

2 Australian Research Council Linkage Grant (LP0776662) *Grandparents as primary carers of their grandchildren: A national, state and territory analysis* (HREC 07312). The Chief Investigators were Bettina Cass, Deborah Brennan, and Sue Green. Anne Hampshire as a Partner Investigator. The SPRC research team members were: Trish Hill, kylie valentine, Marilyn McHugh, Christiane Purcal, Megan Blaxland, Saul Flaxman and Bridget Jenkins. Rochelle Coggan worked on the project while completing an internship at the SPRC. The partner organisations were: Mission Australia, the then Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA); Department of Children

ducted in collaboration with non-government organisations and government departments. The research team aimed to bring the voices and perspectives of grandparents into the policy arena as well as contributing to the literature on “social care”, which has been largely silent on grandparents raising grandchildren. We wanted to explore the ways in which grandparent care is positioned at the intersections of state and family, public and private, and formal and informal care provision. We investigated grandparent care in Indigenous and non-Indigenous families and examined the associations between formal and informal grandparent care and various social and demographic variables. These included: family composition and history; pathways into and out of grandparent care; the age, labour force status, income and principal income sources of grandparents and parents; cultural and linguistic background; health and disability status of grandparents, children and grandchildren; housing tenure; availability and strength of informal social networks; use of family and children’s services; and eligibility for receipt of family payments and care allowances at Commonwealth and state/territory levels.

Here we report the major findings of the study and point to their implications for policy and practice.

How many grandparent carers are there in Australia?³

Enumerating grandparent carers may seem a straightforward issue, but it is complex both methodologically and conceptually. In recent years there has been considerable uncertainty about the number of grandparents raising grandchildren in Australia. Having a reasonable estimate of the number of grandparent carers is essential for policy making and professional practice, but there is little clarity about this issue. Authoritative sources have put forward divergent estimates:

- data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Family Characteristics Survey 2003 suggested that there were approximately 22,500 grandparent families caring for 31,100 children (ABS, 2004);
- the ABS Family Characteristics and Transitions Survey 2006–07 findings identified 14,000 such families, headed by around 23,000 grandparents (ABS, 2008); and
- analysis of the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) survey suggested that 27,718 children under 15 years lived in households with grandparents only (Brandon, 2004).

An important reason for these variations is that the surveys from which they are drawn are not designed to capture grandparents’ responsibility for grandchildren. Statistical agencies often categorise families into types based upon the relationship of household members to one person designated as the “household head”, rather than identifying the actual relationships of care and responsibility, especially when these are outside the norm. As well, sample sizes may be too small to provide reliable estimates, and changes to survey methodology may further contribute to fluctuating estimates.

In 2006, the ABS Census of Population and Housing identified grandparent–grandchildren relationships for the first time. Analysis of Census data suggests that there were:

- 8,050 families where grandparents were raising grandchildren under 15 years (3,271 lone-grandparent and 4,779 couple-grandparent households);

and Families (NT); Department for Families and Communities (SA); and Family & Community Services (formerly Department of Community Services) (NSW).

3 This section is based on Brennan et al. (2013), pp. 32–65.

- 35,926 families that included grandparents and grandchildren but in which no parent–child relationship was identified (which could be families where grandparents have responsibilities for grandchildren); and
- a further 27,594 families where a lone parent was living with a grandparent of their child.

Future researchers will need to interrogate the 2011 Census in order to analyse the most recent demographics relating to grandparent care.

Grandparent carer survey⁴

The centrepiece of the study reported here was an Australia-wide survey of 335 grandparents raising their grandchildren; the largest such survey yet conducted. The survey provided insights into many aspects of grandparents' experiences in raising grandchildren. It explored household location and composition, details of the grandchildren and relationships with their parents, income and financial support, changes to grandparent employment, the health of grandparents and grandchildren, and the effects of raising grandchildren on the survey participants' family relationships and social life. It asked about access to support services and concluded with evidence of grandparents' strength and resilience.

Survey participants were recruited in various ways, including through advertisements placed in national media, such as *The Senior* and *The Voice* publications. Research partners and various grandparent support groups distributed information about the survey and made paper copies available to their members. Respondents could elect either to fill in a paper-based form or an online version of the survey. Given our recruitment methods, it is likely that our respondents were more connected to government agencies and formal and informal services than their peers; however, we did not seek to be representative but rather to tap into a range of views and experiences. The fact that our respondents may be more strongly connected to support groups than other grandparent carers highlights the critical importance of all such families having access to information and support.

Demographic characteristics and family circumstances

Most respondents (87%) were women; more than 90% were born in Australia or the UK; and just under 5% identified as Indigenous Australians. Almost half (43%) had a post-school qualification, while a similar proportion (46%) were educated to Year 10 or below. Respondents came from all states and territories except the Northern Territory and from different types of locations (major cities, regional and remote areas). The majority were home-owners or paying off a mortgage, while close to one-third were renting.

The 335 grandparents were raising 576 grandchildren, an average of 1.7 per family. The grandchildren were comparatively young, with the majority being of primary school age or younger, and a further one-third of high school age.

The dominant reason for raising grandchildren was parents' substance abuse (in more than two-thirds of families), followed by child neglect, parents' mental illness and domestic violence. Often a combination of factors existed, coupled with complex family relationships. Many grandparents said they were motivated to take in the grandchildren to keep them out of the foster care system.

Three out of four of the families had a formal arrangement for at least one of the grandchildren in their care. Contact arrangements with the birth parents varied widely;

⁴ This section is based on Brennan et al. (2013), pp. 74–131.

however, the proportion of children in the sample whose parents were largely or completely absent from their lives was much higher than in the national Census data.

Financial disadvantage, employment and housing

The grandparent households in the survey were, as a group, financially disadvantaged. More than 70% had incomes below the national average, and a majority relied on government payments such as income support payments, allowances and age pension. Only one-third lived mainly on employment income. Many had to raise additional funds to pay for the grandchildren's needs, by selling investments, drawing down savings, increasing their hours of employment or re-entering employment.

More than 90% of households received some financial assistance with raising their grandchildren. Most often this was a Centrelink payment and/or a care allowance provided by a state/territory government (McHugh & valentine, 2011). A small number of grandparents received cash support from the children's parents. More than one-third of respondents stated they had difficulty accessing government financial assistance, often due to administrative hurdles, perceived disrespect from staff, lack of information, and complexity of intra-familial relationships. Financial stress was widespread. Two out of three said they were just getting along or feeling poor, and this was mostly as a direct result of raising their grandchildren.

Age accentuated financial disadvantage. The younger grandparents were more likely to have higher incomes and were much more likely to hold a job than the older grandparents, who generally had lower incomes and relied on government benefits. Even among the 21% who were "self-funded" retirees, many struggled to meet their financial obligations, with investment losses during the global financial crisis adding extra stress. A sense of financial deprivation was high across all age groups.

Almost two-thirds of grandparents in the survey had to make changes to their employment because they took on care for their grandchildren. This sometimes caused significant upheaval within the families. Mostly, grandparents reduced their working hours or gave up work altogether, and those changes were frequently borne by grandmothers rather than grandfathers. Loss of income and superannuation ensued, adding to financial stress. Others increased their working hours, came out of retirement or struggled on in their jobs, causing considerable emotional and physical strain.

Grandparents in the younger age group (under 55) were almost twice as likely to change their employment as those in the oldest group (65 years plus). Even among the latter, who might be expected to be retired, more than one-third changed their employment; that is, they worked more, worked less or came out of retirement. The effects of such employment change also varied with age: younger grandparents tended to be concerned about loss of career prospects and superannuation. The middle age group (55–64) often had to delay retirement, while the older grandparents might need to work longer or re-enter the workforce.

Assuming responsibility for the care of grandchildren necessitated changes to housing for four out of five respondents. More than half had modified their housing or moved, often resulting in significant financial expense and upheaval. Close to 20% of grandparents wanted to change their housing but were unable to, usually due to the cost, and so they continued living in what they saw as unsuitable accommodation. Housing changes were more frequent among the younger grandparents than the older groups, probably reflecting better financial circumstances.

Physical and mental health

Health issues presented a significant problem for grandparent-headed families, with almost half of all the grandparents reporting they had a long-term illness or disability. In addition, raising grandchildren negatively affected both the physical and mental health of the grandparents: 62% stated their health had deteriorated due to raising their grandchildren. Younger grandparents tended to be healthier than the middle and older age groups, although more than one-quarter of grandparents under 55 years old had a long-term illness or disability.

More than half of the survey respondents said at least one of their grandchildren had physical problems, and more than 80% said their grandchildren had emotional or behavioural problems. Health problems were often clustered; for example, a grandchild might have both physical and emotional/behavioural problems or there might be several grandchildren in the family with health problems. Abuse and abandonment by the parents were identified by the grandparents as the cause of many physical injuries and psychological symptoms.

In a significant proportion of families, the health problems of grandparents and grandchildren coincided. Almost half of the grandparents with a long-term illness or disability raised a grandchild with a physical health problem, three-quarters had a grandchild with a psychological problem, and more than one-third had a grandchild with both physical and psychological problems. This highlights the need for appropriate health care supports for both grandparents and grandchildren.

Relationship and social issues

Some grandparents' relationships with their partners deteriorated as a result of taking on responsibility for their grandchildren, but others remained the same. There was less deterioration in relationships with extended family members, but rarely did relationships with partners or with extended family improve. Major factors associated with relationship tension were the physical and emotional demands of parenting grandchildren, but also the loss of retirement freedoms, and an increase in work-related stress.

The social lives of many grandparents also suffered. More than half said that their friendships and community participation had deteriorated due to raising grandchildren, and even larger proportions said time for their own interests and their general wellbeing had declined. Social isolation was a strong theme in the grandparents' comments and stories. Not being able to share the interests and social activities of their empty-nested or retired friends was the main contributor to loneliness. However, a minority of grandparents relished mixing with younger parents and participating in children's activities.

The youngest grandparent age group (under 55 years) experienced more reduction in community participation and availability of time for their own interests than did the older groups, possibly due to the combination of work and child-rearing responsibilities. Both the youngest and the oldest (65 years plus) age groups reported more deterioration in their friendships than the middle group. For the older grandparents this was related to not being able to join their friends in their retirement pursuits.

Access to support groups

Among support and information services for grandparent-headed families, support groups were the most widely used by the survey sample. Almost two-thirds of grandparents in the survey belonged to support groups, and many commented on how valuable the

groups had been in increasing their strength, wellbeing and social connections. The next most common support services, which were available to around 30–40% of survey families, were child care/out-of-school-hours care, caseworker support, and respite.

The age of grandparents affected their support needs to some extent. Many younger grandparents found support groups unsuitable, as they met during working hours and most members were older and at a different life-course stage. Older grandparents expressed more need than younger respondents for support in dealing with teenagers.

Summary

While the grandparents in the study frequently struggled on a number of fronts, it is obvious that they feel deep love and devotion towards their grandchildren. Many grandparents expressed the great joy that their grandchildren had brought into their lives, as well as the rewards that came from the grandchildren's love and from seeing them blossom. Grandparents coped with their difficulties by using their resilience and humour.

Indigenous grandparents⁵

Demographic characteristics and family circumstances

Indigenous grandparents were a special focus of this study because Indigenous children are significantly overrepresented in out-of-home care compared with non-Indigenous children.⁶ Approximately 5% of respondents to the survey were Indigenous grandparents, which roughly reflects their proportion in the population as a whole but is far lower than their representation among all grandparent-headed families. In order to increase understanding of the issues facing Indigenous grandparents, we conducted in-depth interviews with 20 grandparents in New South Wales, South Australia and the Northern Territory.⁷ The Indigenous interviewees were diverse in terms of their demographic characteristics, housing and residential arrangements, income, employment status and access to financial support and services.

The number and ages of the grandchildren also varied considerably, ranging from infants and toddlers (1–3 years) to young people aged 17 years or more. Participants were evenly divided between those who had formal kin care agreements in place and those who cared for their grandchildren under an informal, family arrangement. While many grandparents preferred to raise grandchildren under informal arrangements because of the perceived difficulties of dealing with the judicial system or fear and reluctance to contact child protection authorities, some preferred the stability of formal legal custody.

The grandchildren had come to live with their grandparents for a variety of reasons, most commonly because of drug or alcohol misuse and other socio-emotional and financial problems of the parents, including mental illness and imprisonment. Most had little or no contact with their parents, even if they were still alive.

5 This section draws on Brennan et al. (2013), pp. 132–161.

6 In June 2012, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children were almost ten times more likely to be the subject of care and protection orders than were non-Indigenous children. In all jurisdictions, the rate of Indigenous children on orders was higher than the rate for non-Indigenous children, with ratios ranging from 3.3 in Tasmania to 15.2 in Western Australia (AIHW, 2012).

7 These jurisdictions are the home states/territories of the non-government organisations and government departments that supported the research.

Financial disadvantage

While a small number of participants said that raising their grandchildren had little or no effect on their financial situation, many reported that it had caused them considerable financial stress and hardship and at least three of the 20 participants were not receiving government payments to which they may have been entitled. Many participants also reported changing their employment situation after taking care of their grandchildren, with many moving to working part-time or stopping working altogether as a result of their care commitments.

Physical and mental health

Participants commonly reported that both they and their grandchildren faced physical and mental health problems, although most were reluctant to attribute their own physical health problems to their care commitments. They more readily attributed mental health problems to their caring role and frequently reported frustration and stress associated with raising their grandchildren. Similarly, participants commonly attributed their grandchildren's mental health and behavioural problems to the abuse or neglect they had experienced while under their parents' care or due to the trauma of being separated from their parents.

Cultural continuity

Almost universally, Indigenous grandparents believed that continuity of cultural and kinship knowledge was of paramount importance for them and their grandchildren. Many highlighted the importance of Indigenous kinship systems and relished the opportunity to spend time with grandchildren to instil traditional Indigenous values. Many also reported that they and their grandchildren took part in cultural and community activities, including traditional dancing and Elders groups. Although several participants noted the importance of being supported by their extended family to raise their grandchildren, some reported that they had little support from family or friends.

Summary

Like the other grandparents who took part in the survey, the Indigenous grandparents interviewed for this study demonstrated high levels of resilience. They provided stability, love and care to their grandchildren, often in the face of considerable challenges. However, a lack of support services was an issue raised by many participants and there are gaps in the information, support and services provided to Indigenous grandparent carers. Several grandparents were not receiving the Parenting Payment and Family Tax Benefit for which they might be eligible and were unaware of services available in their areas, or believed that they did not qualify for services or respite care. Most said that they would like additional financial and practical support or respite if they were available.

Perspectives of policy makers and service providers⁸

In addition to our survey and interviews with grandparents, we conducted focus groups with policy makers, service providers and support groups in order to better understand the policy and practice issues they saw as being significant for grandparents, grandchildren and parents. Focus groups were held in New South Wales, South Australia, the Northern Territory and the Australian Capital Territory. Some were conducted in

8 This section draws on Brennan et al. (2013), pp. 66–73.

metropolitan areas and some in rural areas. While discussion was free-flowing, it tended to focus upon child protection, legal matters, family and children's services, income support, care allowances, health services, education services for children and young people, and housing policies.

The key support needs identified by policy makers and service providers included:

- assistance with the complex negotiations of family relationships across generations (including with adult children);
- support to deal with the complex needs of many children and young people being cared for by their grandparents; and
- information about changing parenting practices; and assistance with the grief and loss experienced by all generations.

Respite and crisis support were widely identified as priorities, as was case management. The focus groups identified a range of barriers to accessing payments and services. Some grandparents are reluctant to use services or apply for payments to which they are entitled because they do not want to disclose their circumstances to government agencies. Many do not claim family payments to which they may be entitled for fear of repercussions (including intimidation and violence) from their children (the parents of the grandchildren). Actual and perceived differences in support provided for foster carers and kinship carers are a source of resentment for many.

The focus groups identified the financial and non-financial costs incurred by some grandparent carers as being a major issue. Financial costs included foregone employment, the expense of adding bedrooms or making other modifications to the home, educational expenses (including extra tutoring or remedial classes) and the legal costs of seeking formal custody. Non-financial costs included the loss of former social networks and friendships, the difficulty of participating in social activities, and grief about the loss of the "normal" grandparent role.

Service providers and support groups emphasised the strength, resilience and capabilities of grandparent carers and urged that these be recognised and built upon by policy makers.

Issues for policy and practice

The key policy and practice issues to emerge from this study are as follows:⁹

- Grandparents need accurate and timely information regarding financial and social support services to be provided to them through state/territory and Commonwealth government departments as well as non-government support groups.
- Multiple channels should be used to distribute information. These could include: websites, face-to-face meetings, support groups, hotlines, flyers and newsletters.
- Many grandparents prefer face-to-face contact rather than simply printed information, such as handbooks and information kits. While the latter are essential, they must be constantly updated to remain relevant.
- Staff in government agencies should treat grandparents with respect, provide consistent, clear and correct information, bear in mind their diverse circumstances and needs, and understand that grandparents almost always seek to act in the best interests of their grandchildren.

9 The ideas presented here emerged at a forum organised by the Centre for Children and Young People at Southern Cross University and the Social Policy Research Centre at the University of New South Wales as part of the Collaborative Research Network that links the two centres. The Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia and Southern Cross University funded the forum.

- Parity of payment between kinship carers and foster carers was raised by many individuals. Grandparent carers argued that they should receive the same support and entitlements as foster carers; however, most do not wish to be registered as formal; that is, statutory carers of their grandchildren (which could then entail supervision of their “parenting” role). Also, grandparent carers indicated that they need more information when the children come into their care, such as an information pack that goes with the child and contains their legal records, education and medical history.
- A key issue for health and community services and education providers is the insufficient resources available to maintain the health and wellbeing of grandparents and the grandchildren they are raising, as well as ensuring appropriate and effective educational experiences for their grandchildren.
- Some grandparents, service providers and policy makers are of the view that significant numbers of grandparent carers do not claim, and are not supported to claim, payments and benefits to which they are entitled. Future research might examine this issue.
- Very few cases involving grandparents are heard by the Family Court or Federal Circuit Court. Between 2001 and 2009, only 62 such cases were heard. In approximately half of these, child protection issues were raised. These included physical, emotional and sexual abuse; neglect; concerns about the safety of children as a result of the parents’ mental health issues or the negative influence of parents’ behaviour relating to drug and alcohol abuse; exposure to criminal activity; and antisocial behaviour. Two cases were referred to the Family Court’s Magellan list, a case management model implemented by the court for responding to cases where one (or both) parties have raised serious allegations of sexual abuse or physical abuse of children in a parenting dispute (Coggan, 2010).
- The legal system for grandparents raising their grandchildren can be confusing and it is often by chance that some grandchildren fall under the jurisdiction of a state Children’s Court rather than the Family Court. Grandparents who become primary carers may have stronger rights in relation to parenting decisions than those with informal arrangements, but these grandparents are unlikely to receive the same kind of support, financial or otherwise, as grandparents who become primary carers through a state Children’s Court.

Conclusion

Based on evidence drawn from an analysis of national data sources, a large survey of grandparent carers, interviews with Indigenous grandparent carers and focus group discussions with policy makers and service providers, this study of grandparents who have primary responsibility for the care of their grandchildren yielded significant issues for the design of socio-legal policies that sensitive to the circumstances of grandparents and their grandchildren. These include the following matters:

- statutory recognition of the relationships and responsibilities of grandparents entailed in maintaining the wellbeing of grandchildren and the capacity of the grandparents to maintain their caring;
- adequacy of financial resources, which have salience for Commonwealth and state/territory jurisdictions (Department of Social Services, Centrelink and child protection authorities);
- recognition and support in education and health services systems; and

- information services in the legal, child protection, income support, health and education systems that are timely, appropriate and easily accessible.

Above all, grandparents seek official and community recognition and respect, including adequate resources, for the very important roles that they play and the responsibilities that they bear for the health, wellbeing and development of their grandchildren, who have often been affected by traumas and troubles in their own young lives.

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