

MI Policy Brief: Grandparents Raising Grandchildren

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Grandparents as Guardians: A Nationwide Trend

Grandparents widely consider spending time with their grandchildren one of the greatest benefits of growing older, according to a 2009 survey conducted by Pew Research Center. But, what happens when circumstances necessitate that grandparents become *primary* caregivers for their grandchildren? At a time when non-traditional families have become ubiquitous, the growing number of custodial grandparents and “skipped-generation families” are quietly impacting family dynamics, necessitating changes to long-standing public policies at both the federal and state level.

The social phenomenon of grandparents raising grandchildren intersects with the welfare system, foster care policy, housing policy and custody laws, among others. Often, these complex intersections result in a tangled web of well-intentioned support services that may prove difficult for families to access. While best practices are beginning to emerge, this is an area in which policymakers, researchers and sociologists need to pay attention. What are the most cost-effective policy options that optimize outcomes for both grandparents and their grandchildren? As the following data reflect, this is a growing issue that will remain pertinent for quite some time.

Nationally, nearly 6.7 million grandparents live with their grandchildren, and nearly 2.7 million are responsible for their grandchildren’s care.¹

To put this in perspective, there are more grandparents responsible for their grandchildren than families receiving Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF). The number of

Grandparent Caregivers, 2000-2008
grandparents primarily responsible for most basic needs of a grandchild

	Total 2008	% Change 2007-08	% Change 2000-08
Total	2,636,728	+5	+8
Race and Ethnicity			
White	1,397,090	+9	+19
Black	621,887	+2	-12
Hispanic	483,182	0	+14
Asian	89,608	-3	+9
Poverty Level			
Below poverty level	468,059	+1	+2
1-3 times poverty level	1,251,111	+4	+12
3-5 times poverty level	595,608	+8	+6
5 times or higher than poverty level	303,488	+6	+4

Note: Whites, blacks, and Asians are non-Hispanic. Asians include Pacific Islanders.
Source: Pew Research Center analysis of Decennial Census and American Community Survey data

PewResearchCenter

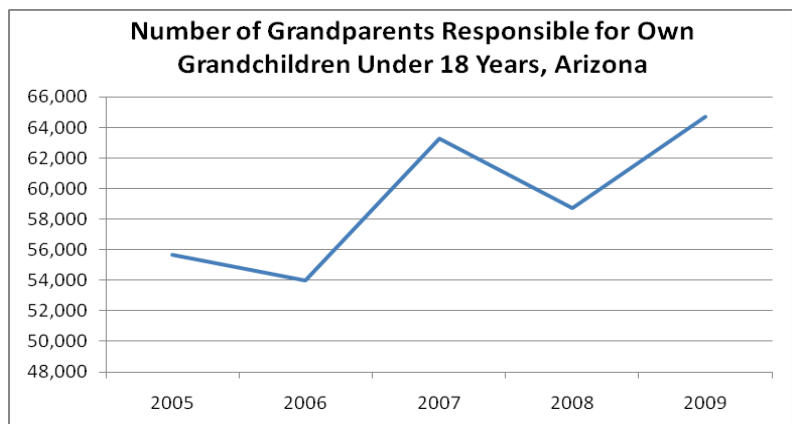
¹ U.S. Census, 2009 American Community Survey

grandparents serving as primary caregivers for their grandchildren is up from 2.4 million in 2000, with a noteworthy spike corresponding to the onset of the Great Recession in 2007². While the phenomenon of skipped-generation families is disproportionately high among Black and Hispanic families, Pew Research Center found that between 2007 and 2008 the greatest increase, a 9% change, was among Whites. In Arizona, the number of grandparents raising grandchildren increased by a dramatic 16 percent from 2005 to 2009.

In addition to the Great Recession, the steady increase in grandparents raising grandchildren observed over the past decade is most commonly attributed to foster care policies that favor kinship placements. The passage of stricter drug laws and mandatory sentencing, which have resulted in soaring incarceration rates for women, also has had a significant effect.³

More Arizona Grandparents Are Stepping Up to the Plate

The number of grandparents raising grandchildren is on the rise in Arizona, as well. In 2009, nearly 65,000 Arizona grandparents were responsible for more than 77,000 grandchildren.⁴ This is up from the 55,671 Arizona grandparents who were responsible for their grandchildren in 2005. Also, more than 168,000 grandparents were living with their grandchildren.



Source: U.S. Census. American Community Survey

For some families, what begins as a temporary care-giving arrangement proves to be long term. In Arizona, nearly 24,000 grandparent caregivers had been responsible for their grandchild for five or more years as of 2009. The depth of the Great Recession in Arizona only increased the number of intergenerational living arrangements spurred by job loss and financial necessity. In Arizona, the median family income for families with grandparent householders who are living with and responsible for their grandchildren is \$46,192, or \$32,325 if no parent is present. Comparatively, the median family income in Arizona is \$57,855.⁵

Key Challenges for Grandparents

Grandparents often become primary caregivers due to difficult family circumstances. In many cases parental absence is the result of substance abuse, incarceration, psychiatric disorder, child abuse, neglect or a death.

² Pew Research Center, Since the Start of the Great Recession, More Children Raised by Grandparents, 2010

³ Smith, C. and Beltran, A. Grandparents Raising Grandchildren: Challenges Faced by These Growing Numbers of Families and Effective Policy Solutions. *Journal of Aging and Social Policy*, Vol. 12(1) 2000.

⁴ U.S. Census, 2009 American Community Survey.

⁵ U.S. Census, 2009 American Community Survey.

For grandparents, these circumstances can mean that their care-giver role is complicated by a strained relationship with their own child, guilt about their performance as “a parent,” and grave concern for their grandchild’s well-being. Furthermore, grandparent caregivers must cope with marital strain, social isolation, unexpected financial burdens and significant demands on their time.⁶ Some are dipping into their retirement savings, even before they reach retirement age. Not surprisingly, research has found higher rates of depression among grandparents raising grandchildren.⁷ And, grandparents are generally less informed about and less likely to access social support services that could help alleviate these stressors.

This is especially problematic since the grandchildren they care for are more likely to need medical and mental health services. Often, these children suffer from conditions related to prenatal drug and alcohol exposure. In other instances, they have suffered abuse or neglect and have failed to form healthy, secure attachments with adults. Many experience anxiety or depression and need treatment.

Custody Matters

Under the best circumstances, accessing medical and mental health services is challenging. When a grandparent has physical but not legal custody of their grandchild, it can be nearly impossible. In Arizona, there are five types of custody: informal custody, guardianship, court placement and/or foster care, adoption, and non-parent custody. Lack of custody can prove a barrier to accessing medical treatment or enrolling children in school if proper consents are not in place. For some grandparents, the custody issue intersects with cultural attitudes toward adoption or termination of parental rights. Research shows that some avoid the formal child welfare system due to concerns that their cultural values will not be respected.⁸

(Grand)Parenting with Fewer Resources

In Arizona, grandparents raising grandchildren have access to a shrinking pool of public services depending on such factors as their living arrangement, legal relationship to the child and household income. Arizona’s Grandparent Kinship Care Support program, piloted in FY 2007 to ease the financial burden of grandparents, formerly provided a package of subsidies to help caregivers afford their unexpected responsibility. The program was desirable to the state because it kept children out of the foster care system and saved the state money on large foster care subsidies. Instead, it provided grandparents a one-time payment of \$300 to help with transitional expenses, such as beds and other furniture, and a \$75 clothing and personal allowance per month per child. While the legislation that established this program still exists, funds are no longer available.

Additionally, the state may provide a small check out of the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) program. Because Kinship Care grandparents save the state money, keep

⁶ Hayslip, J. and Kaminski, P. Grandparents Raising Their Grandchildren. *Marriage & Family Review*. (37)1 2005, 147-169.

⁷ Smith, C. and Beltran, A. Grandparents Raising Grandchildren: Challenges Faced by These Growing Numbers of Families and Effective Policy Solutions. *Journal of Aging and Social Policy*, Vol. 12(1) 2000.

⁸ Smith, C. and Beltran, A. Grandparents Raising Grandchildren: Challenges Faced by These Growing Numbers of Families and Effective Policy Solutions. *Journal of Aging and Social Policy*, Vol. 12(1) 2000.

families together and often are living at or near the poverty level upon assuming childcare responsibilities, the 60-month lifetime benefit limit for TANF was historically not applied to them. However, grandparents raising grandchildren have not been immune to the impacts of state budget cuts and a shrinking social safety net. Last year, the temporary subsidies and TANF payments to most grandparents were eliminated. For those who still qualified for TANF based on their poverty-level income, a 36-month lifetime limit was retroactively applied to their benefit. Moving forward, this will be further reduced to a two-year limit—affecting all TANF recipients – among the shortest time limits in the country.

Supporters of the Kinship Care program say this restriction is difficult to understand since the lifetime limit on TANF was intended to act as an incentive for working-age adults to find work. Many grandparents who take in their grandchildren are elderly, and finding full-time work is difficult, if not impossible. They were clearly not the intended targets for welfare reform strategies, which were intended to force parents – not grandparents – into the workforce. Grandparents have also been cut from programs that help pay for child care. State funding for child care subsidies has gone down significantly.

Further confusing this issue is the fact that there are multiple entry points into the government system. Administrative decisions have created a mishmash of confusing policies where some grandparents still receive support, but most others do not. For example, grandparents who agree to undergo the process to become a state-licensed foster home receive more assistance than those who simply agree to assume responsibility for their children's kids. Oralia Gracia-Alinea, with the Family Resource Center, said who gets paid is not a matter of what they do or, often, not even how low their income is, but through which government door they enter the system. "Grandparents are doing all they can and community organizations and churches are trying to help," Gracia-Alinea said. "But they are short on resources, too. Often the faith community can only help with one utility bill or a bag of groceries. Community assistance is not sufficient or consistent."

Looking Ahead

Clearly, the concurrent trend of more grandparent caregivers and fewer support services is not a winning combination for Arizona's children. First and foremost, access to the current range of services should be clarified and streamlined so that any obstacles to enrollment are removed and more eligible families receive support. Additionally, fully funded, subsidized guardianship programs, consent laws that facilitate medical and educational access, and accommodating housing policies will prove critical to the success of grandparent-headed families. Moving forward, an in-depth study of the grandparent care-giving situation in Arizona should be undertaken to improve our understanding of the long-term ramifications of funding cuts and to identify cost-effective policy options that will maximize the social and educational outcomes of children being raised by their grandparents.

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