

Child Policy Brief



Kinship Care

Children Raised by Grandparents and Other Relatives Need Support

An increasing number of children are living with grandparents and other relatives because their parents are unable or unwilling to care for them. This phenomenon of “kinship care” provides stability and permanence for children whose lives are disrupted due to abuse, neglect, or other problems. However, children raised by their grandparents or other kin are more likely than children in traditional foster care to live in poverty, to have special health and educational needs, and to lack access to health care. The needs of kinship families are receiving increased attention from policymakers as the importance of these relationships becomes more widely understood.

A Definition of Kinship Care

The term “kinship care” broadly refers to circumstances in which children are in the primary care of a relative because their own parents are not able or willing to raise them. Causes usually include a parent’s substance abuse or mental illness, often leading to child abuse and neglect. Teen pregnancy, domestic violence and HIV/AIDS are less frequent causes.

The definition includes both formal placement with relatives through the child welfare and/or court systems, and informal arrangements initiated by concerned family members. The relative may have obtained some form of legal custody, or not. Kinship care is increasingly important in Georgia because the number of foster families is declining. Placement with relatives allows children to maintain familial and cultural ties.

Between 42,000 and 65,000 Georgia children live in their grandparents’ households with neither of their parents present. An unknown number live with relatives other than grandparents. The tradition of grandparents raising grandchildren has been particularly strong in the Southeast, and Georgia ranks seventh in the nation for percent of children living in a grandparent’s household.

Needs

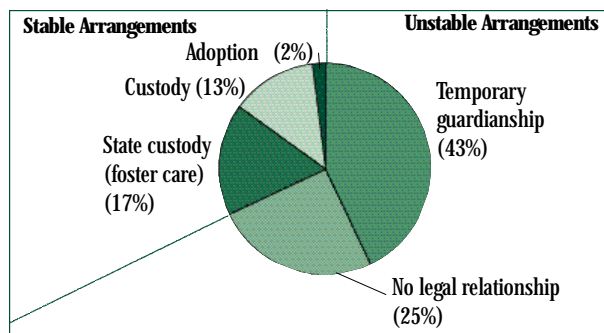
Research on kinship care shows that these families face problems in three major areas:

Secure Legal Status

Many kinship families lack formal, permanent custody or guardianship of the children in their care. Permanent living arrangements are important because children fare better in a secure home environment, even without their own parents. The caregiver needs authority to

make decisions affecting the child’s well being, including medical treatment and school enrollment.

In a sample of grandparent-headed families in Atlanta, custodial relationships varied widely, with one quarter of grandparents having no legal relationship with their grandchildren whatsoever. Over two thirds of their children had unstable living arrangements which could be revoked by a parent at any time.



From Yorker, et al. “Custodial Relationships of Grandparents Raising Grandchildren: Results of a Home-Based Intervention Study”. *Juvenile and Family Court Journal*. Spring 1998, p. 20.

Financial Support

Grandparents typically do not anticipate the expenses of raising a second generation of children and have not saved money for their care. They often live on a fixed income. A 1997 national study showed that while 17% of children residing with their parents lived below the federal poverty level, 27% of children residing with their grandparents lived in poverty. Children living with a grandmother only and no parents present were the most severely impacted, with 63% falling below the federal poverty level.

Of the approximately 42,000 - 65,000 children living with grandparents only in Georgia, approximately 18,000 - 28,000 fall below the federal poverty level. Three sources of cash assistance are available to help support poor children in these families, and each has limitations. (See table on following page.)

Health Care Access

There are significant barriers to routine primary health care for kinship children in Georgia. Children living with grandparents are two and a half times more likely than children living with their own parents to be uninsured. Medicaid and PeachCare provide alternatives for low-income children, but if the caregiver also applies for Medicaid for herself, her income will count in assessing the child’s eligibility. While almost all foster children automatically enroll in Medicaid,

Sources of Cash Assistance

Cash assistance program	Georgia eligibility requirements	Benefits	Limitations
Adoption Assistance	Children must be adopted by a court-approved relative or other adult(s)	\$365 per child per month	Requires termination of parental rights, which may cause family strife and threaten parents' acceptance of kinship placement.
Foster Care	Children are placed in state custody. Relative's home must meet all state standards for approved foster home.	\$365 per child per month	Family loses custody to the state, which can change the placement at any time. Caregiver must undergo regular supervision by caseworkers.
Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF)	Child-only grants scaled to child's income; income limits set annually by Georgia legislature. Work activity requirements waived for kinship caregivers in TANF State Plan issued January 2001.	\$155 per child per month	Child must live with a "specified relative" (within 5th degree) for child and/or caregiver to be eligible for benefits

children outside the foster care system must apply separately. Health insurance and routine care are essential for children living with grandparents and other relatives because they typically have a range of special health care needs, including low birth weight, learning disabilities, prenatal drug or alcohol exposure, and emotional and mental health problems.

Solutions in Other States

Since 1996, 19 states have created new programs specifically designed to support grandparents and other relative caregivers who are raising children. These programs promote permanency through kinship care arrangements while minimizing state involvement, recognizing that most kinship families do not require the strict oversight placed upon traditional foster parents.

Relative Caregiver Program Experiences High Enrollment in Florida

In 1998, Florida created a new program administered by the Department of Family and Children's services that supports "caregivers who are relatives and who would be unable to serve in that capacity without...payment because of financial burden."

- Already serves over 7,000 children statewide
- Diverse custody and guardianship arrangements qualify
- Exempts caregivers from foster care licensing requirements
- Funded through TANF block grant

Increasing Permanent Placements Through Subsidized Guardianship in Illinois

Illinois uses federal funds for a demonstration project to support families that have opted for permanent legal guardianship instead of foster care or adoption.

- Achieved 14% higher permanency rate for children in subsidized legal guardianship than in conventional foster care population
- Pays same as adoption assistance rate to legal guardians
- Created through waiver from Department of Health and Human Services
- Early evaluation results show significant cost savings over foster care.

Building Kinship Support Networks in Tennessee

Tennessee is launching a pilot program to enhance supportive services for kinship families and build a new private sector network to address kinship families' needs.

- Private nonprofit service providers are currently applying to administer a comprehensive program including therapeutic child care, respite care, information and referral services, support groups, legal assistance, and counseling
- Funded through TANF block grant.
- Cash subsidy will be designed by private providers, tailored to family needs.
- Program will serve Nashville, Memphis and one rural county

How Can Georgia Respond?

"Subsidized legal guardianship" programs are the most common vehicle used to support kinship families. These programs introduce subsidies that pay a cash benefit to relatives who become their child's court-appointed custodian or guardian. An effective subsidized legal guardianship program should include:

- Cash assistance, comparable to Foster Care rates
- Automatic Medicaid or PeachCare eligibility
- Reimbursement of costs related to attaining legal guardianship
- Supportive services including quality child care, respite care, and counseling

If a foster care-comparable cash benefit were available to Georgia children living with grandparents who fall below the federal poverty level, it could cost the state from \$8 to \$12 million per year. Additional funds would be required to cover health insurance, legal cost reimbursement and supportive services. However, an unknown number of these children already receive or will eventually receive services through TANF, Child Protective Services, Foster Care, and even the juvenile justice system. Further research must be conducted to determine overall costs and benefits of subsidized kinship care, but early results from other states confirm the efficacy of these programs in promoting child well-being and preventing future problems.

Conclusion

The increase in children entering foster care in Georgia over the last year, and a significant decrease in the number of foster parents available, indicate a growing need for grandparent and other relative caregivers. However, kinship caregivers can only serve when they have adequate resources to meet the expenses of raising children. Georgia could help kinship families by creating a program that specifically addresses their unique needs.

For more information, please contact Jennifer Edwards, Andrew Young School of Policy Studies, 404-651-1540.