

Social Policies Affecting Relative Caregivers

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Introduction

In the year 2000, according to the U.S. Census, approximately 6 million children in the United States lived with grandparents or other relatives other than their biological parents (Landry-Meyer & Newman, 2004). Although most social service agencies advocate for family preservation, research suggests that nonkinship caretakers receive more services than kinship care providers (Gordon, McKinley, Satterfield, & Curtis, 2003).

Summary of Primary Findings

Child welfare agencies have recently began placing children into the home of relatives as an alternative to non-relative foster care providers; this is a process known as 'formal kinship care.' Many more cases exist in which children live in the homes of relatives in an informal arrangement.

Formal kinship care providers receive significantly fewer services such as respite care, training, support groups, or mental health services for children than foster care providers (Gordon, McKinley, Satterfield, & Curtis, 2003).

Most relative caregivers, when compared to non-relative foster care providers, are older, less-educated, have lower incomes, are in poorer health, and are more likely to be single parents. For these reasons, relative caregivers are likely to be in greater need of assistance and support services (O'Brien, Massat, & Gleeson, 2001).

Financial assistance is available to kinship care providers through TANF, but the options vary from state to state (Anderson, 2006). (See Table 2)

To add to the predicament of inadequate services for relative caregivers, Landry-Meyer and Newman (2004) state that the grandparent-grandchild family structure is often not

recognized as a 'legitimate' family structure." (p. 1009)

In many informal caregiving arrangement situations, caregivers are denied services or assistance because parental rights of the birth parents have not been terminated (O'Brien, Massat, & Gleeson, 2001). Often times, relative caregivers do not want to terminate the rights of the birth parents or formally adopt the children to avoid further role confusion within families. Additionally, many relative caregivers (some who have cared for the children since birth) have mistakenly thought that they had legal custody rights over the children through legal guardianship granted by the courts, only to later find out that the birth parents rights superseded their own (Gordon, McKinley, Satterfield, & Curtis, 2003).

DATA AT A GLANCE

...APPROXIMATELY 6 MILLION CHILDREN IN THE UNITED STATES LIVE WITH A RELATIVE OTHER THAN THEIR BIRTH PARENTS...

Implications for Social Work Practice

Increased attention needs to be placed on the rights of relative caregivers. With the prevalence of children in the United States being raised by relatives in both formal and informal arrangements, reform is becoming increasingly necessary in social policies and programs to benefit relative caregivers.

10 Recommendations for Practice with Systems of All Sizes

1. The demographic of relative care providers compared to non-relative care providers reveals a higher-risk population among relative caregivers.
2. Being a higher risk population, relative caregivers are in more need of social support.
3. Being at a higher risk, relative caregivers are also in greater need of financial assistance.
4. Social policy needs to be reformed to recognize the grandparent-grandchild family structure, as well as other relative family structures, as legitimate families.

5. Child welfare agencies are currently offering more services to non-relative foster care providers than formal kinship care providers. This is a policy that needs to change.
6. Action needs to be taken to reform policies to allow for increased legal rights for informal relative caregivers.
7. Reform is necessary in current policies that favor birth parents regardless of living arrangements if parental rights have not been terminated.
8. Increased attention is necessary to promoting awareness of legal options for relative caregivers.
9. It may be more beneficial to standardize TANF benefits from state to state.
10. Child welfare agencies currently do not require the same training for kinship care providers as non-relative foster care providers. As a result, kinship care providers are less educated on their rights and available services.

Conclusion

In the United States, the number of children being raised by relatives is ever increasing. Policies affecting relative caregivers' rights and the financial and support services available to them are in great need of re-evaluation and reform.

References

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About the Author

Amber Lawson is a Bachelor of Social Work student at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga and is currently completing an internship with the Relative Caregiver Program which is designed to assist the caregivers of relative children.

TABLE 2
Payment Options Used for Children in State Custody Who Live with Kinship Caregivers: 1999

STATE	PAYMENT AT SAME LEVEL AS FOR LICENSED NONKIN PROVIDERS (IF LICENSED)		PAYMENT LOWER THAN NONKIN PROVIDER BUT HIGHER THAN TANF GRANTS	TANF GRANTS	
	IV-E ELIGIBLE CHILD	NON IV-E ELIGIBLE CHILD		FAMILY	CHILD-ONLY
	Arizona	X			
California	X		X	X	
Florida	X	X			
Illinois	X	X	X		
Maryland	X	X		X	X
Massachusetts	X	X			
Michigan	X	X		X	X
Missouri	X	X		X	X
New Jersey	X		X	X	
New York	X	X			
North Carolina	X	X			X
Ohio	X	X		X	X
Oklahoma	X	X		X	X
Pennsylvania	X	X			
Tennessee	X	X			
Texas	X	X		X	X
Washington	X	X		X	X
Wisconsin	X	X			X

* In Arizona, relatives who receive TANF grants are eligible to receive supplementary clothing and personal allowances from the child welfare agency, which average about \$70 per month

