

# Understanding grandparent care

**Policy and practice implications of grandparents as primary carers of their grandchildren in the Australian context**

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# Introduction

- Grandparents have played important role in caring for grandchildren in Australia and other similar industrial countries.
- Non-Indigenous Aust households, from C19<sup>th</sup> typically nuclear families; family networks now more multi-generational links than ever.
- Extended family - core of support networks of most Aust, esp for informal child care and elder care.
- Paper's focus: grandparents assuming primary care of their grandchildren.

# Objectives of the paper

- Overview data and policy context of grandparents providing primary care in Australia, in Indigenous and non-Indigenous families.
- Identify impacts for grandparents.
- Highlight some current gaps in policy and service provision for grandparents.
- Outline an Australian community service program (Mission Australia in Nowra, NSW) addressing some support needs of grandparents.

# Reasons for becoming grandparent carers

- ↑ number of grandparents assuming primary care of their grandchildren in Australia, UK, other European countries and US, where children's parents are considered either temporarily/permanently unable to provide care or are absent from parenting responsibilities.
- Reasons include: severe illness; disability; incarceration; death; unemployment; drug and alcohol impairment of parents; and/or neglect and abuse of the child.
- In many instances, circumstances are associated with poverty and deprivation-low income.

# Australian national data on grandparents providing primary care

- Grandparent families - families in which the guardian of the children aged 0-17 years are grandparents of the children (ABS).
- Covers formal and informal care, irrespective of legal arrangements.
- 2003 ABS estimates - 22,500 families; 31,100 children aged 0-17.
- Likely underestimate - statistically under-reported.

# Key characteristics

- In 61% of cases the youngest grandparent was 55+.
- 2/3 relied on govt benefit or pension as primary source of income.
- 47% were lone grandparent families (93% of these grandmothers).
- 1/10 had 3+ children.
- 92% of children had a biological parent living elsewhere; 75% of children had face-to-face contact with parent/s at least once each yr; 37 % had face-to-face contact fortnightly or more frequently.
- Importance of conceptualising grandparent care as at least a dyadic relationship, and in a considerable proportion of circumstances a triadic relationship.

**Under what circumstances are grandparent-headed families formed?**



# Formal out-of-home care

- ↑ in *formal* grandparent care, as officially constructed under state/territory legislation and practice:
  - large ↑ in placement of children and young people designated “in need of care and protection” away from parental home in “out-of-home-care” under child protection and child welfare laws in all states/territories;
  - policy priority for placement of children and young people in “kinship care” where caregiver is family member or a person with pre-existing relationship with child, rather than in foster/residential care.

## Increase in statutory out-of-home care placements

- ↑ of 70% in placement of children in out-of-home care from 1996-2005.
- Rates per 1,000 children from 3.0 in 1997 to 4.9 in 2005.
- 95% in home-based care (57% in foster care, 42% in kinship care).
- Reasons for ↑ include: substantiated child neglect and/or abuse; parents' mental or physical health problems; drug and alcohol misuse; parental imprisonment; relationship breakdown & conflict; long term unemployment; death of parent.

# Reasons for giving preference to kinship care

- Welfare agencies more sensitive to racial, ethnic and cultural factors and importance of family and cultural/ethnic continuity in child development.
- Difficulties in recruiting and retaining suitable foster carers.
- Fewer financial and human resources required.
- Formalisation of existing familial relations.

# Indigenous families

- Indigenous children 6 times more likely to be in out-of-home care.
- 54% of these with relatives or kin; further 22% with other Indigenous caregivers.
- Very harmful history of removal of children of mixed Indigenous/European parentage from families and communities, lasting until latter half of 20<sup>th</sup> century.
- Promulgation of Aboriginal Child Placement Principle:
  - with child's extended family;
  - within child's Indigenous community;
  - with other Indigenous people.

# Other routes of entry into grandparent care

- Grandparent care established following application to Family Federal Magistrates Courts granting grandparent/s parenting order where parents' marital relationship has broken down, resulting in separation or divorce, and the grandparent/s have made order to the court to be granted parenting rights.
- Also informal care arrangements (not under official jurisdictions) when parents considered by extended family to be unable to provide adequate and appropriate care for similar reasons leading to formal care arrangements.

# **The impact of caring and the issues facing grandparents as primary carers**



# Financial resources

- Low income likely to frame grandparent care.
- Strain on financial resources – high need children.
- Curtailment of plans to continue employment or to retire.
- Level of financial and services support varies within and across jurisdictions.
- Some grandparent carers note lack of parity with foster carers re payments and support services - uneasy position on boundary between public and private spheres - grandparent care formalising relationships of familial obligation.

# Legal and other issues

- Legal issues are complex and may result in confusion for grandparents about state/federal jurisdictional issues and procedures.
- High cost of Family Court proceedings.
- Difficulties accessing legal aid.
- Greater support given through state Children's Court when children formally placed in out-of-home care.
- Informal grandparent carers least likely to access payments and services.

# Grandparent relationships

- Often assume parenting responsibilities at short notice and in stressful circumstances.
- Many grandchildren suffering trauma and emotional distress before and after breakdown of relationship with parent/s.
- Often adverse circumstances leading to kinship care  
→ serious stress to both children and grandparents, even before grandparents take primary responsibility.
- Different social context of childrearing.

# Interview excerpt

*The children are in my care until they are 18, so I have two grandchildren. You might as well say I've had the eldest all barring a year of his life, but in that year he was with them it has left a lot of scarring, what his dad did to him, what he did to her. It took a lot of hard work from the pre-school. He is getting there. The other little one I've always had problems with him. I couldn't quite put a word on it but there was always something not quite right ... his behaviour is becoming worse so I just recently had him diagnosed and he is autistic. They can't tell me if it was because mum was on drugs or dad did that...*

# Social support networks

- May feel isolated from peers with greater leisure time; few opportunities for respite.
- Can impact on relationship between couple, other family members or friends.
- May be without formal and informal support structures.
- Informal social support structures crucial to wellbeing.

# Health and wellbeing

- Evidence of negative impact on physical, emotional & psychological health.
- Given age, may compound fears of ill-health, disability & death with resultant severe impacts on the grandchildren in their care.

## Interview excerpt

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*Our main fear was that we would die and then what would happen to the children ... we could go another 10 years without having any health problems but who knows what is around the corner.*

# **A service model: Provision of support to grandparents as primary carers**



# Nowra grandparent program

- Run by Mission Australia since 2004.
- Currently assisting 50 grandparents.
- Aims to ↑ capacity of grandparents as primary carers, ↑ access to local support mechanisms, develop strong social supports, build leadership skills.
- Activities program; workshops; advocacy; recreation; networks; handbook and information kit.
- Grandparents have noted clear benefits in terms of raising grandchildren, dealing with stress, coping with legal issues, improvements to self-esteem and relationships.

# Interview excerpt

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*The grandparents' group is a phenomenal thing; they advocate for us and call if they haven't seen us for a few weeks. It's nice knowing that there's somewhere to go and someone to call.*

# **Discussion and future research**



# Perspectives on grandparents as primary carers

- Two main perspectives in current literature:
  - child welfare/child protection focus; and
  - sociology of ageing.

Grandparent care rarely placed within literature on care-giving.

- Grandparent care likely to occur in identifiable socio-economic and socio-cultural circumstances, especially in low income kin networks.
- Analysis must be focused on policy regime (in Australia at federal and state/territory levels) to provide better understanding of influence of official practices.
- Grandparent care sits at intersections of state/family provision. Public policies lie at the heart of the formal shaping and determination of grandparent care, and also frame informal grandparent care relationships.

# “Social care” framework for analysing grandparent care (adapted from Daly and Lewis, 2000)

- Care as labour: often (but not always) unremunerated and unsupported labour, distinguishable from other out-of-home care placements (foster care) which are supported by state-funded allowances and services - especially so with respect to informal grandparent care.
- Care located within a normative framework of obligations and responsibility: grandparent care as a normative expectation incorporated into and rendered official in child welfare law and practice.
- Care as an activity with financial and emotional costs which extend across public/private boundaries: financial; emotional; social; and health-related. Such costs tend to be insufficiently publicly shared through service provision and formal recognition of and compensation for additional costs incurred by grandparent care.

# Future research questions

- What are the impacts of federal and state/territory social policy systems on the circumstances of grandparent families?
- How are policies shaped by official expectations of grandparental obligation and responsibility (that may diminish public responsibility)?
- Experiences and outcomes for grandchildren: where “outcomes” are defined and measured broadly, examining types and quality of arrangements which provide stability, security, positive wellbeing and development for children.
- Relationships and circumstances of Indigenous grandparent families and the meanings attributed to grandparent care in Indigenous families.

# The last word (from a grandparent)

*It ties you down a lot but when you think back what it could have been if we hadn't taken them and you just think well they might not be here now ... It gives your life love ... I said to him this morning "You're 14 next year mate, you've only got another two years to live with us." He said, "Oh no I'm not leaving here". That just makes you feel good.*