



**Australian Government**

**Australian Institute of Family Studies**

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# **Inquiry into Grandparents who take primary responsibility for raising their grandchildren**

**Submission from  
Australian Institute of Family Studies**

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## **Grandparents who take primary responsibility for raising their grandchildren: What do we know, what do we need to know and how might we find out?**

### **Key aims of this submission:**

- to provide a brief overview of research into the prevalence of, and circumstances experienced by, families in which grandparents have the primary responsibility for raising their grandchildren;
- to identify gaps in research; and
- to suggest a methodology for addressing these gaps.

### **Who are grandparents?**

The term “grandparent” normally signals the existence of a relationship with a “grandchild,” which is two generations apart. Though the relationship is commonly a biological one, this is not always the case. In addition, many individuals who have achieved adult status would continue to see themselves as grandchildren to their grandparents.

The focus of this submission is on grandparent-headed families—family structures in which grandparents have major or total care responsibilities for their grandchildren. These carers are grandparents in the generational sense described above. Their role however is closer to and sometimes indistinguishable from that of a parent. Indeed it could be argued that from the perspective of personal relationships, children in such families miss out on the experience of having this person as a grandparent in the traditional sense of the word.

### **The changing nature of “traditional” grandparenting roles**

While the nuclear family continues to predominate in Australia and other western countries, research over the years has consistently indicated that key relationships extend beyond household boundaries, with much “caring and sharing” occurring between members of the extended family network and across the generations. Such relationships are especially likely to be evident among adult children and their parents and among grandparents and their grandchildren.

A study by the Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS), for example, found that over 97% of preschool children have face-to-face contact with at least one grandparent and that most infants and most children aged 4–5 years see at least one of their grandparents on a weekly or more frequent basis (Gray, Misson, & Hayes, 2005). More recently, Horsfall and Dempsey (2011) reported that around one-half of Australian grandparents spend time with their grandchildren at least once a week, and just under three-quarters spend time with them at least once a month.

This is consistent with findings that grandparents are important providers of informal child-care, especially for children under the age of five years (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2010). In a further study conducted by AIFS, Baxter (2013) reported that, of children under three years old with employed mothers, the combined use of formal and informal child care has become increasingly common, and in cases of informal care, there has been a shift towards increased use of care by adult relatives (especially grandparents) and away from care by adult non-relatives. Baxter noted that in 2011, nearly four in ten of these children (39%) were cared for by a grandparent at some time during the week—a proportion similar to that of children in long

day care (47%).<sup>1</sup>

This is an issue deserving of close attention in its own right, but all the more so given the simultaneous ageing of the population and the increased tendency for older people to remain in paid work (see Hayes, Qu, Weston & Baxter, 2011).

The literature also contains evidence of a more contextual nature, with the type and strength of intergenerational ties, as well as the roles played by grandparents, having changed considerably since the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. For example, whereas children in this earlier period were expected to defer to the elderly, relationships are now more likely to be characterised by feelings of affection rather than by the assumption or exercise of adult authority. Ties based on a sense of obligation have also weakened (Cherlin & Ferstenberg 1986; Denham & Smith 1989; Peterson 1989).

Consistent with such changes, contemporary grand-parenting roles are now more likely to include those of companion, teacher, family, community and cultural historian, and mentor. More generally, grandparents may act as “role models” that complement and extend those of parents and other family members (see Denham & Smith 1989; Ochilree 2006; Weston & Qu 2009). Grandparents can also become surrogate parents, either in an informal relationship-focused sense, or in the more formal sense characteristic of “grandparent-headed families”, described in more detail below.

Some grandparents also provide financial support to grandchildren and the grandchildren’s parents. This can be especially important, even critical, in times of hardship or crisis. Mutchler and Baker (2009), for example, showed that children in single-mother families who lived with grandparents were less likely than children of other single-mothers to experience poverty.

With contemporary relationships between grandparents and grandchildren being typically based on warmth and companionship, the roles adopted are more likely than in the past to be voluntary (Cherlin & Ferstenberg, 1986). But the other side of voluntary relationships is that not all grandparents would agree to have frequent or significant interactions with their adult children, children’s partners and/or their grandchildren. The reverse can also be the case – with adult children or their partners, and sometimes grandchildren themselves, not being willing to foster relationships with particular grandparents.

In addition, among those grandparents who *are* involved with their grandchildren or their grandchildren’s families, not all play out their roles in positive ways. Indeed, some may create a great deal of tension and be responsible for considerable disruption within the family (Ochilree 2006).

### **Grandparents and parental separation**

Where parents are separating or separated, grandparents who have already developed a productive, meaningful relationship with their grandchildren can provide them with a sense of stability and continuity. For example, they can help grandchildren better understand that parental separation is not their fault, that both parents still love them, and that the disruptions in their lives are likely to dissipate with time.

Of course the dynamics of post-separation relationships between grandparents, grandchildren and the parents of these grandchildren can be complex; it is not axiomatic that maintaining these relationships will always be of benefit to the family. For example, by “taking sides”, some grandparents may add to the conflict between the parents and add to the distress of family members, including the grandchildren.

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<sup>1</sup> These results were based on ABS Child Care Confidentialised Unit Record Files (CURFs).

Previous AIFS research suggests that, given that children continue to be more likely to live mostly with their mothers after separation and are also likely to have established stronger relationships with their maternal rather than paternal grandparents prior to separation, grandchildren whose parents have separated are more likely to have contact with their maternal than paternal grandparents (Kaspiew, Gray, Weston, Moloney, Hand, Qu et al., 2009; Weston & Qu, 2009; Weston, 1992). Similar trends have been observed overseas (e.g., Lussier, Deater-Deckard, Dunn, & Davies, 2002).

In a study reported by Weston & Qu (2009), most separated parents described the relationship between their children and their maternal and paternal grandparents as “close” or “very close”. At least half of these parents also maintained that the relationship between their own parents and the children had not changed since they and their partner had separated.

Non-resident separated fathers, however, were more likely to report that relationships between their children and their children’s grandparents had become more distant. And reporting on the results of focus groups with grandparents whose adult children had separated, Deblaquiere, Moloney & Weston (2013) noted that some grandparents spoke, sometimes poignantly, of having little or no opportunity to maintain or strengthen their bond with their grandchildren once their adult children had separated.

### **Grandparent-headed families**

For a variety of reasons, examined more fully below, some grandparents find themselves *in loco parentis*. This can happen in a variety of ways. For example from a cultural perspective and/or because parents are working long hours or working away from the home, grandparents may be acting as head of the household. In such cases, their relationship with their grandchildren may be primarily that of a parent; or it may be somewhat ambiguous in this regard. In other situations, grandparents may clearly be the primary or even the sole carers of their grandchildren.

The circumstances in which grandparents in these families find themselves are best documented within the framework of broader definitions of families and households. For statistical purposes, ABS (2011a) defines a family (or “family household”) as follows:

A family is defined by the ABS as two or more persons, one of whom is at least 15 years of age, who are related by blood, marriage (registered or de facto), adoption, step or fostering, and who are usually resident in the same household.

Each separately identified couple relationship, lone parent-child relationship or other blood relationship forms the basis of a family. Some households contain more than one family. (Glossary in 2011 Census Dictionary)

Under this “family household” definition, families may comprise: couples with or without co-resident children of any age; single parents with co-resident children of any age; grandparents with grandchildren and no parent of the grandchildren present; and other families of related adults, such as brothers or sisters living together, where no couple or parent-child relationship exists (although this excludes relatives beyond first cousins).

## **Types of grandparent-headed families**

Grandparent-headed families may include those with grandchildren under 15 years old, and/or those with grandchildren who are full-time students aged 15–24 years old (and who would therefore be classified as “dependent students” by the ABS), along with those with non-dependent grandchildren only.

However, not all those with “dependent grandchildren” under 25 years old (as defined by their age and full-time student status) would have the primary responsibility of caring for their grandchildren. As the ABS (2012) notes in relation to Census data on these families, no information is available about the extent to which the grandchildren were receiving financial support from their grandparent(s).

Some grandchildren may have been living with their grandparents because their grandparents’ residence was more conveniently located. They may also have been receiving financial support from their parents. On the other hand, some young adult grandchildren who are classified in the Census as “dependent students” may have moved in to provide help to their grandparents.

Amongst those families in which grandparents are caring for dependent children, Brennan, Cass, Flaxman, Hill, Jenkins et al. (2013 p., iii) suggest a further distinction between:

- Formal (statutory) grandparent carers who are raising grandchildren as a result of orders from the Australian Family Court or Federal Magistrates court (now Federal Circuit Court) or a state or territory Children’s Court, Youth Court or Magistrate’s Court; and
- Informal grandparent carers who do not have a federal, state or territory order in place. Typically, these arrangements have been made through private family negotiations. They may or may not be known to state or territory child protection authorities.

Brennan et al. (2013) suggest that the importance of the distinction between statutory and non-statutory status lies in the fact that grandparents who have assumed responsibility for children on a formal basis are more likely to be able to gain access to appropriate supports and services. Grandparents in the role of informal carers, on the other hand, are generally less likely to be knowledgeable about or even able to access such supports and services (McHugh and Valentine, 2011). In short, where grandparents fall on the statutory/non-statutory divide is likely to impact on the day-to-day functioning of the family.

While the proportions of grandparent-headed families that are formal or informal remains unclear, Selwyn and Nandy (2014) maintain that most children who were living with relatives other than parents in the United Kingdom are being raised in informal, unregulated arrangements.<sup>2</sup>

## **How grandparent-headed families are formed**

Ways in which grandparent-headed families are formed relate to the above-noted different types of such families. It is important to recognise that grandparent-headed families do not always come about as a result of family dysfunction. A Mission Australia (2007) report, for example, notes that it is not uncommon amongst Aboriginal Australians to leave children with grandparents if they have a need to move a substantial distance – for example from a regional to an urban environment. As implied above, grandchildren may also be in the care of their grandparents because the grandparents’ house may be closer to school or a further education facility. Sometimes too, older grandchildren may be playing the role of helper (with respect to

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<sup>2</sup> Selwyn & Nandy based this conclusion on analyses of microdata from the 2001 UK Population Census.

physical needs for example). They may not regard themselves as “dependent children” or their status in this regard may be ambiguous.

No large-scale, representative study of grandparent-headed families has been undertaken to identify how or why Australian grandparent-headed families are formed. That said, the general consensus seems to be that most families in which grandparents are the major or primary carers of their grandchildren are formed via one of three major routes.

The first is via state and territory child protection services making a statutory care kinship care placement. In this regard, Brennan et al. (2013 p.1) cite evidence from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW 2013) that in 2012, almost 41,000 children and young people across Australia were the subject of care and protection orders issued by child protection authorities. They also note that more than half of the children in home-based out-of-home care were placed with relatives or kin (mostly grandparents).<sup>3</sup>

A second route is via parenting orders that can be made by a family law court. These orders appear to be relatively rare because, as Backhouse (2009) has identified, they are likely to be expensive to obtain, can exacerbate already existing conflict, and in any case, come with little guarantee of “working” effectively.

A third route is that of privately negotiated arrangements that may or may not be known to child protection authorities. The size of group is unknown, but it generally assumed to be substantial.

In broad terms, most children are placed in the care of grandparents because their parents are unwilling or unable to provide adequate care for their children (Mission Australia 2007). A common reason for placement appears to be substantiated abuse or neglect, often associated with domestic violence and parental substance misuse and/or mental illness.<sup>4</sup> Poverty and unemployment can also be a trigger for placement of children with grandparents, as can irretrievable breakdown in the relationship between children and parents. In a small percentage of cases, a parent may have simply disappeared. In some cases, one or both parents have been incarcerated or are deceased.

### **Number of grandparent-headed families**

The information that follows is based on the Census of Population and Housing 2011. These statistics were ordered by AIFS. That is, they have not been published by the ABS.

In total, the Census data found 46,680 “grandparent families”, that is, households where there are grandparent-grandchild relationships in the absence of parent-child relationships. This

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<sup>3</sup> The AIHW explains that, “Some children are placed in out-of-home care because they were the subject of a child protection substantiation and require a more protective environment. Other situations in which a child may be placed in out-of-home care include those where parents are incapable of providing adequate care for the child, or where alternative accommodation is needed during times of family conflict. . . . Out of home care is considered an intervention of last resort, with the current emphasis being to keep children with their families wherever possible.” (AIHW, 2013, p3). Out-of-home care that is classified as “home-based care” refers to placements that are “in the home of the carer who is reimbursed (or who has been offered but declined reimbursement) for expenses for the care of the child. This is broken down into three subcategories: relative/kinship care, foster care and other home-based out-of-home care.” (AIHW, 2013, p.36).

<sup>4</sup> The Council on the Ageing (2003) have suggested that substance abuse is an important reason that grandparents become full-time carers for their grandchildren in Australia. In Victoria for example, 52% of grandparents surveyed by the Council said they were caring for their grandchild/ren because of their son or daughter’s substance abuse.

represented just under 1% of all families (as defined by the ABS) in 2011. Of these, 29,880 had dependent children under 15 years old, or dependent student grandchildren (aged 15–24 years).<sup>5</sup>

- 37% were couple families with grandchildren under 15 years old or dependent student grandchildren.
  - 27% (of all grandparent families) were couple families with grandchildren under 15 years old, and
  - 9% were couple families with dependent student grandchildren (i.e., full-time students aged 15–24 years) and no grandchildren under 15 years old.
- 27% were single grandparent families with grandchildren under 15 years old or dependent student grandchildren.
  - 19% (of all grandparent families) comprised single grandparents and grandchildren under 15 years old, and
  - 8% were single grandparents with dependent student grandchildren and no grandchildren under 15 years old.
- Grandparent families with non-dependent grandchildren only, were more likely to be headed by a single grandparent than by a couple, at least one of whom is their grandparent (representing 21.0% and 15.0% of all grandparent families, respectively).

Of the 29,880 grandparent families with dependent grandchildren (either aged under 15 years or full-time students aged 15–24 years):

- 43% were couple families with grandchildren under 15 years old;
- 13% were couple families with grandchildren who were dependent students.
- 30% comprised a single grandparent with grandchildren under 15 years old;
- 15% comprised a single grandparent with grandchildren who were dependent students.

### **Where grandparents are guardians of resident children under 18 years old: Number of such families and characteristics**

The ABS defines a guardian as “a person aged 15 years and over who is reported as being the guardian or main carer of any children 0–17 years, regardless of the existence of any legal arrangement.” (ABS, 2005, p. 44)

The estimates outlined below have been published in ABS reports and are based on surveys undertaken in 2003, 2006–07 and 2009–10 (ABS, 2004, 2005, 2008, 2011b). While the ABS refers to these families as “grandparent families”, they are referred to here as “grandparent-guardian families” to distinguish them from other families headed by grandparents where guardianship status is not known.

#### ***Number of families with grandparent guardians***

Based on the above surveys, estimates of the total number of grandparent-guardian families in Australia were:

- 23,000 in 2003<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> It is important to note that not all of these families would entail grandparents having the primary or sole care of the grandchildren.

- 14,000 in 2006–07, and
- 16,000 in 2009–10.

The following trends relating to characteristics of grandparent-guardian families and other families are drawn from the ABS (2005) report and are based on the the 2003 survey data.<sup>7</sup> Here “other families” refer to all families with children under 18 years old other than grandparent-guardian families.

### ***Number of children in families with grandparent guardians***

- In 2003, there were 31,100 children under 18 years old living in these grandparent families.
- Only a minority of grandparents and parents in other families were caring for three or more children, with grandparents being less likely to have this number of children in their care, compared with parents in other families. More specifically, three or more children were being cared for in 11% of these grandparent families and 19% of other families.

### ***Age profile of grandparents and children in families with grandparent guardians***

Not surprisingly, grandparents in these families tended to be older than parents in other families and the children in grandparent families tended to be older than children in other families.<sup>8</sup>

- 61% of these grandparents (including any partner) were 55 years and over, compared with 1% of parents (including any partner).
- In most cases, the youngest child in these grandparent families was either 5–11 years or 12–14 years, whereas the youngest child in other families was most commonly under 5 years or 5–11 years. The following proportions applied for age of youngest child in these grandparent families and other families (respectively):
  - 0–4 years: 15% and 38%
  - 5–11 years: 37% and 36%
  - 12–14 years: 36% and 14%
  - 15–17 years: both 12%

### ***Single grandparents in families with grandparent guardians***

- The proportion of all grandparent families that were headed by a single grandparent was higher than the proportion of all other families that were headed by a single parent (47% vs 21%).
- Of all families headed by a single grandparent, most were grandmothers (93%).

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<sup>6</sup> In the “Family Characteristics” reports, the number of these grandparent families is rounded to the nearest 1,000. In the 2005 report, the ABS indicates that there were 22,500 such families in 2003.

<sup>7</sup> Such information was not provided in relation to the subsequent relevant surveys.

<sup>8</sup> In couple families, the younger of the two grandparents (or grandparent and partner) are compared with the younger of the two parents (or parent and partner)



### ***Employment status and reliance on government payments***

- One or both grandparents/parents were employed in 34% of these grandparent families and 85% of other families
- No grandparent/parent was employed in 66% of these grandparent families and 15% of other families.
- Government pension, benefit or allowance represented the main source of cash income in 63% of these grandparent families and 20% of other families.

### ***Housing and other costs***

- Given home ownership statistics across different age groups, the ABS points out that grandparents in grandparent families would have been more likely than parents in other families to own their own home. It is assumed therefore, that these grandparent families would, on average, have had lower housing costs than other families.
- At the same time, the ABS notes that grandparent families can be formed suddenly and unexpectedly. This can be associated with experiences of
  - high costs associated with accommodating the children;<sup>9</sup> with
  - ongoing costs affecting the sustainability of the grandparents' retirement incomes.

### ***Location of usual residence***

Much the same proportions of grandparent families lived in major cities and regional areas (48% and 45% respectively), whereas nearly two-thirds of other families lived in major cities (65%).

### ***Grandchildren's contact with their biological parents***

Of the 31,100 children (under 18 years old) in families with grandparent guardians: 28,700 had at least one biological parent living elsewhere. This represents 92% of all children in these grandparent families. In total, 75% of children with a biological parent living elsewhere saw one or both of their parents at least once a year.

Of all children in grandparent-guardian families with biological parents living elsewhere, 62% saw their other parent(s) at least once every three months. Specifically:

- 37% experienced fortnightly or more frequent time with a parent
- 25% saw a parent monthly or quarterly.

Of the remainder:

- 12% saw a parent every six months or once a year
- 26% either saw a parent less frequently or not at all.

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<sup>9</sup> This conclusion is based on a report by the Council on Ageing (2003).

## Indigenous grandparent-headed families

At the 2006 Census,<sup>10</sup> the grandparent in 15% of all “one-grandparent families” identified as Indigenous, while at least one of the grandparents in 11% of “couple grandparent families” identified as Indigenous (see Brennan et al., 2013 p. 4). Brennan and her colleagues noted however that, as with the broader national statistics of grandparent carers, caution needs to be exercised when estimating the proportion of grandparent families in Indigenous communities. Importantly, these authors also point out that terms such as *grandparent carers* or *grandparent-headed families*, “do not necessarily have cultural relevance for Indigenous communities” (p.4).

This observation was strongly reinforced in a paper delivered to the Family Law Council by Colleen Wall on behalf of her colleagues in Aqua Dreaming Ltd. The paper, cited with permission, provides the following extremely relevant contextual observation.

It is a Grandmother’s responsibility to ensure that children in their family are taught the Law of the Camp ... This means that children are taught how to collect the right foods and in what amount for eating, healing and sustainability of the eco system. They are taught how to behave towards others and how to respect those who are in higher positions than they are in their totemic system. When they are more mature they are then taught serious Djuka (Land Law) or the totemic or Djukin (personal responsibility). This in its entirety is what we call ‘Lawful Behaviour’ – by this we mean that each person has a way of behaving ‘on country’ so country is respected and will remain healthy and provide sufficiently for all. (Wall, Johannessen & Viellaris 2104 p. 5).

Consistent with this statement, the Indigenous grandparents interviewed by Brennan et al. (2013) believed that continuity of cultural and kinship knowledge was of paramount importance for them and for their grandchildren. The researchers found that these grandparents:

... strongly valued the importance of Indigenous kinship systems and the opportunity to instill traditional Indigenous values. Many reported that they and their grandchildren took part in cultural and community activities together. Although several participants noted the importance of support from their extended family in raising their grandchildren, some reported that they had little support from family or friends ... However, many noted the lack of support services and commented on perceived gaps in the information, support and services they received. Several who were not receiving any financial or other supports for which they might have been eligible were unaware of available services or sources of information. Others simply assumed that they would not qualify for services or respite care (p. 4).<sup>11</sup>

## Growth of grandparent families?

The past twenty years has seen rising numbers of children entering the out-of-home care system (Bath, 1997; Bromfield and Osborn, 2007; Horner, Downie, Jay, & Wichmann, 2007; Paxman, 2006). In turn, kinship care has been cited as a rapidly growing form of out-of-home care

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<sup>10</sup> 2011 Census data on this issue are not readily available.

<sup>11</sup> As an ethnically diverse country, Australia has many “family types”, some of which would find certain parallels in the broadly-based kinship structures that define Indigenous Australian families. A truly comprehensive review of grandparenting in general and grandparent-headed families in particular in Australia would need to take account of the structural and hierarchical assumptions operating within these families. In some such families for example, the distinction between grandparents and great aunts and great uncles may be more blurred than they are in “mainstream” Australian families. Lines of authority and assumptions about who has responsibility for particular caring and other functions are likely to vary considerably and are also likely to be challenged as these families “rub up” against mainstream Australian society.

arrangements in Australia and internationally (Child Safety Services, Queensland 2001; Paxman, 2006). Indeed, a higher proportion of children in the out-of-home care system are now in kinship care than in foster care, whereas the reverse was the case in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Kiraly, 2013). As noted above, a high proportion of children in kinship care have been placed in the care of their grandparents (Brennan, et al., 2013; Boetto, 2010).

In part, increasing rates of kinship care reflect more recent sensitivities to maintaining family ties, especially where those ties are linked to specific cultural needs (Ainsworth and Maluccio, 1998; Mason, Falloon, Gibbons, et al., 2002; Paxman, 2006). At the same time, Brennan, et al. (2013) point out that increasing difficulties have been experienced in recruiting and retaining foster carers and that these difficulties have increased the pressure to find kinship care placements (McHugh, 2004).

A review of the international literature by Horner, et al. (2007) led these authors to conclude that grandparent families represent the fastest growing of all families comprising children who were not living with their parents. Mission Australia's (2007) reading of the data led to a conclusion at the time that there was "increased reliance on grandparents to provide full time care to their grandchildren" (p. 2).

The ABS surveys cited above, however, suggest that the number of grandparents reporting themselves to be guardians of their grandchildren in Australia has fluctuated since at least 2003. On the other hand, there does appear to have been an increase in the number and proportion of children being cared by their grandparents. Using ABS Census data and focusing on "usual residence", AIFS found that in 2006, about 24,000 children under 15 years old appeared to be living in a grandparent family. That is, they were grandchildren of the family reference person (i.e., where neither parent of the grandchildren was present). In 2011, this figure was around 28,000. This represents an increase in the proportion of all children under 15 years old who appeared to be in the care of their grandparents from 0.61% to 0.68%.

## **Research Gaps**

While we now have a fair idea of the number of grandparent-headed families in Australia, we do not know the proportions of all such families that are formal (statutory) and informal, and the proportions that may transform from one of these statuses to the other. Perhaps of equal importance, there appears to be little data on the *stability* of these arrangements. In how many of these families (including those with informal care arrangements) do children move from grandparent households into care with parents or other family or non-family members? How often do grandparents have more than a single spell of formal or informal responsibility for their grandchildren?

Importantly, not enough is known about how grandparent carers are faring emotionally, physically and financially. Again, while there are reports on positive initiatives designed to support grandparent-headed families, there is also considerable emphasis in the literature on the challenges that these grandparents face along a range of dimensions such as financial and legal concerns, parenting issues, social supports and problems regarding health and welfare. While these challenges are very likely to be real, their severity and extent in the population of grandparent carers are not known.

The reason for these gaps in knowledge derives from the fact that, as far as we are aware, all non-ABS Australian studies of grandparent-headed families are based on non-representative

samples. Of the non-ABS Australian surveys, the largest seems to be that conducted by Brennan et al. (2013). These authors ran a survey of 335 grandparent carers (drawn from all states and the ACT) as well as interviews with 20 Indigenous grandparents (from NSW, SA and NT) and focus groups and semi-structured interviews with 55 service providers and policy makers (from NSW, SA and NT). They also analysed data from the ABS Census 2006. Their survey of 335 grandparents examined reasons for and consequences of caring for their grandchildren; grandparents' relationships with the parents of the grandchildren; access to financial support at the Commonwealth and state/territory levels; and housing and residential location.

In relation to their finding that 92% of grandparents in their survey indicated that they received government financial assistance for raising their grandchildren, Brennan et al. (2013) pointed out that this high proportion is likely to derive from the fact that “many of the respondents were recruited through grandparent support groups and thus might be expected to have more access to information and support than grandparent carers not linked in to support groups” (p.3). This is by no means meant to be a criticism of the study by Brennan and colleagues, which seems to be the most comprehensive Australian study to date. As will be seen below, deriving representative samples of sub-groups of an already small form of Australian families can be challenging though achievable.

## Options

The above analysis of research gaps highlights the need for a nationally representative, preferably longitudinal study<sup>12</sup> that would identify the number of grandparents who are fully or substantially caring for dependent grandchildren. Such a study could also derive estimates on the circumstances that lead to these arrangements, the psycho-social and cultural characteristics of these families, the physical and emotional health of both the grandparents and the children, the stability of such arrangements, and the strengths and vulnerabilities that the grandparents bring to the task. These data are needed if a well-informed policy or service framework is to be developed.

There is also a need for nested studies with respect to particular groups such as Indigenous families, whose special characteristics have been noted earlier. In addition, it would be important in such a nationally representative study to give a voice to the children themselves (and possibly, their parents)—something that appears to be lacking in the literature to date; and to collect data from representative samples of key stakeholders and service providers as well as including qualitative data in these various approaches.

A key difficulty in deriving a representative Australian sample of grandparent-headed families arises from the fact that they are small in number. The use of administrative datasets seems well worth exploring. For instance, Family Tax Benefit (FTB) recipients identified as grandparents could be a valuable target group for analyses. This sample would only be representative of grandparent carers in receipt of FTB, but would enable identification of such factors as the developmental progress of children in the care of grandparent FTB recipients, grandparent-

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<sup>12</sup> While cross-sectional surveys (that is, surveys conducted at a particular point in time) can be useful, longitudinal surveys help us to identify the number and length of periods of grandparent care, track the children's physical and psycho-social developmental progress and the grandparent's health and wellbeing. Longitudinal studies also provide insight into factors shaping different child, grandparent and family outcomes.

grandchild relationship trajectories apparent in such families, and so on. A limitation of this approach is that this sample would not capture grandparents who have primary or full responsibility for their grandchildren but do not receive FTB. For example, the parents may be the FTB recipients (at least when the sample is selected).

In addition to the above, it is worth noting that AIFS is involved in the conduct of two studies that could be used to gather useful data on grandparent-headed families. One, *Pathways of Care*, is a longitudinal study of children and young people in NSW who were placed on final orders for the first time between February 2012 and August 2013.<sup>13</sup> The second project, *Beyond 18: Longitudinal Study of Leaving Care*, focuses on children leaving out-of-home-care in Victoria. This is being conducted by AIFS on behalf of the Victorian Department of Human Services. It may be possible to derive representative samples of grandparent-headed families from such child protection administrative datasets in the various jurisdictions across Australia. Again, the results could not be generalized to grandparent families that are not registered in these datasets.

Finally, an avenue that would clearly assist in improving our understanding of issues relating to grandparent-headed families in general would be that of seeking the inclusion of additional questions in ABS data collections that have a sufficient number of such families to derive reliable estimates. Though it may only be possible to insert one or two additional questions, the ability to derive reliable estimates on the issues tapped would be most helpful for policy development.

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<sup>13</sup> This project is being conducted by the NSW Department of Families and Community Services. The roles of AIFS are to: (a) assist in the design of survey questionnaires for carers, children and young people, birth parents, caseworkers and teachers; and (b) provide quality control reports on the data collected and to produce output datasets for each wave

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