

Senate Inquiry into Grandparent care – Hearing for Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare

Grandparent carers face myriad issues – psychological, interpersonal, health-related and financial. As a cohort they are older, poorer, in poorer health, less well educated, and caring for more children than foster carers. Adversarial legal processes aimed at securing stable care frequently compound family tensions and conflict.

Grandparents provide greater stability of care than foster care.

Stable care provides a secure base for children to develop, to recover from experiences of stress and trauma, to make up educational deficits and to develop normally. Unlike in foster care, children frequently remain with their grandparents into young adulthood as they make the transition to post-secondary education and the workforce. However, this stability frequently comes at great personal and financial cost to grandparents.

The greatest issue for many grandparent carers is financial.

Many grandparent carers are living in poverty. Those who have retirement savings frequently spend much or all of their savings on the children. Legal fees compound the financial problems. Housing costs are a major financial problem.

Indigenous grandparent carer families are the most disadvantaged.

Indigenous grandparent families as a group are even older, poorer, in poorer health, less well educated and caring for more children than non-indigenous grandparent families. This is of particular concern given their shorter life expectancy.

Services to parents frequently stop once the children are taken into grandparent care, but the problems for everyone remain.

Children and grandparents usually remain in contact with the children's parents. The grief of losing the children compounds parents' mental health and substance abuse issues. They may resent the grandparents' role in their children's lives. Contact between grandparents, parents, children may be fraught and at times frankly unsafe. Children's parents need ongoing support and assistance after the children are taken away, in order for their impact on children and grandparents to be as positive as possible.

Kinship care is not all grandparent care.

In England it has been established that older sisters and brothers raising younger siblings comprise 38% of all kinship carers – nearly as many as grandparents (44%). Numbers of sibling carers in Australia are not yet well established, however census data indicates that there are well over 10,000 such households. These young families are very vulnerable.

We need better data about grandparent care and other kinship care.

The Australian census is limited in what it can currently tell us about the incidence of grandparent and other forms of kinship care. Developmental work on census questions and statistical analysis is needed to more accurately determine the incidence and nature of kinship care relationships.