



# Grandparents Caring for Grandchildren

## Changing roles for grandparents

A single, low-income 52-year-old woman with chronic health problems has cared for her grandchildren for five years—ever since her daughter lost custody of her kids due to drug addiction and subsequent incarceration.



After their daughter's divorce, a couple in their seventies became responsible for their 14-year-old grandson. Since they do not have legal custody, they are unable to make important school and health-related decisions for their grandchild even though he lives with them.

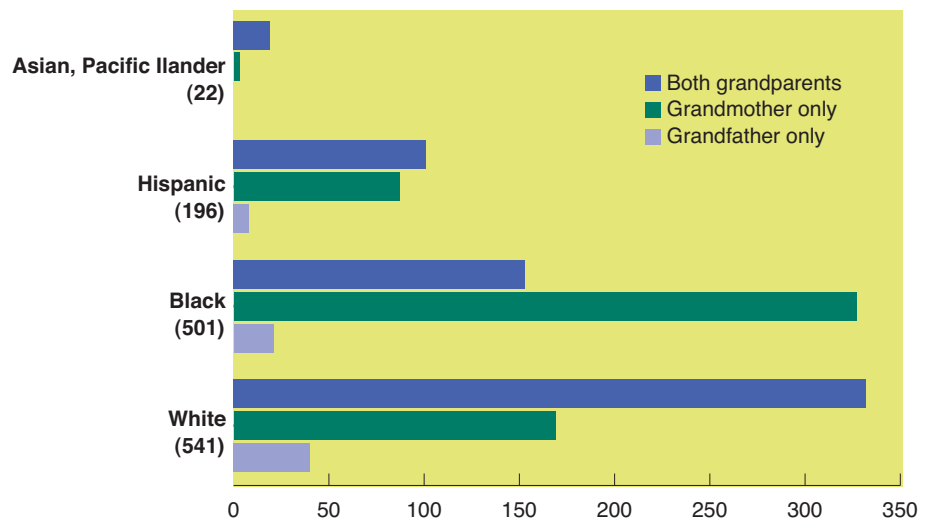
## Why do grandparents become caregivers?

Increasingly, grandparents are taking care of their grandchildren. Across the country, more than 2.4 million grandparents are the primary caregivers of grandchildren living with them.<sup>1</sup> Grandparent caregivers fall into three groups: those with legal custody; those who provide food and shelter but have no legal rights; and those who provide daily care but don't have parental responsibilities.<sup>2</sup>

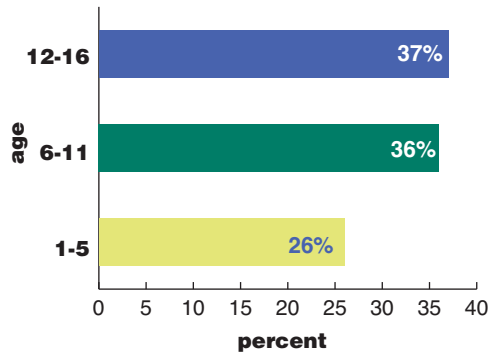
Relatives step in when, for whatever reason, parents can no longer care for a child. This happens because of substance abuse, incarceration, family violence, child abuse or neglect, HIV/AIDS, a parent's death, divorce, financial problems, mental health issues, poverty and unemployment.<sup>3</sup>

The figures that follow provide information on the race and ages of children living with grandparents (figures 1 and 2), and the age and sex of caregiving grandparents (figures 3 and 4). It also highlights the fact that children living with grandparents are more likely to be living at the poverty level (figure 5).

**Figure 1.** Race of children living in Wisconsin with grandparent-maintained families—no parent present.



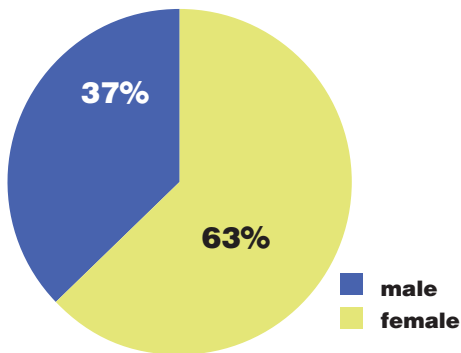
**Figure 2.** Ages of children in grandparent-maintained families with no parent present



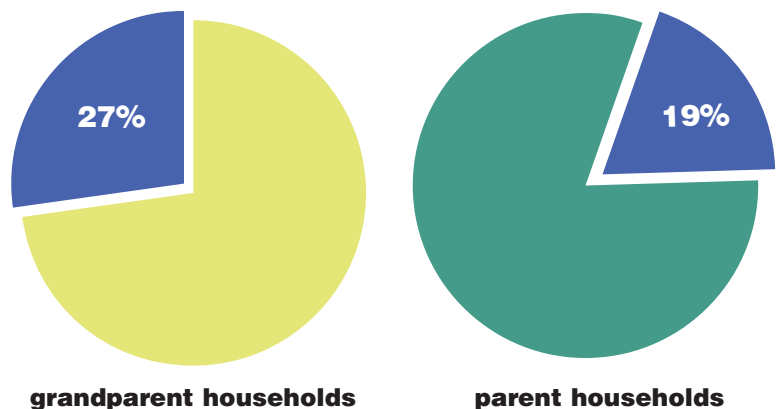
**Figure 3.** Age of caregiving grandparents



**Figure 4.** Sex of caregiving grandparents



**Figure 5.** Comparison of children living in poverty in Wisconsin.



Here are some facts you may not know about grandparent caregivers:

- White children make up the highest percentage of children living in grandparent-headed households.<sup>4</sup>
- Women make up almost two-thirds (63 percent) of grandparent caregivers, with grandmother-headed households more likely to live in poverty.<sup>5</sup>
- Black children are more likely than other ethnic groups to live with only one grandparent, usually a grandmother.<sup>6</sup>
- More than a fourth (27 percent) of the children cared for by grandparents live in poverty compared to children living with their parents (19 percent).<sup>7</sup>
- Grandparents care for children of all ages, with a majority (73 percent) of the children older than 6.<sup>8</sup>
- Grandparent caregivers range from 30 to 90-plus years old, with the highest percentage between 50 and 59.<sup>9</sup>

## What caregiving costs grandparents

Even if grandparents are financially stable, they may become financially strained when caring for grandchildren. Family income for about half (51 percent) of grandparent caregivers is less than \$30,000 a year.<sup>10</sup> Even those who are not poor may find it hard to meet their grandchildren’s financial needs (figure 6).

Despite financial hardships, grandparent caregivers often do not take advantage of community services.<sup>11</sup> Reasons for this vary. They may not know about community resources, may feel uncomfortable seeking help or may associate a stigma with receiving public assistance.<sup>12</sup> Child welfare workers sometimes mistakenly deny benefits to grandparents because they are not aware the grandparents are eligible for financial support.<sup>13</sup> Whether grandparents have legal custody can affect their eligibility for government benefits as well as their ability to get medical care and insurance for their grandchildren.

## Caregivers face physical and emotional upheaval

Grandparents raising grandchildren tend to have more health problems than other grandparents. In general, single grandmothers and those in poverty are more likely to have health problems than married grandmothers and those above the poverty line.<sup>14</sup> More than half (54 percent) the children in grandparent-headed households live with a caregiver in fair or poor health or who has a limiting condition.<sup>15</sup> What’s more, caregiving grandmothers are almost twice as likely to suffer from depression as other grandmothers.<sup>16</sup>

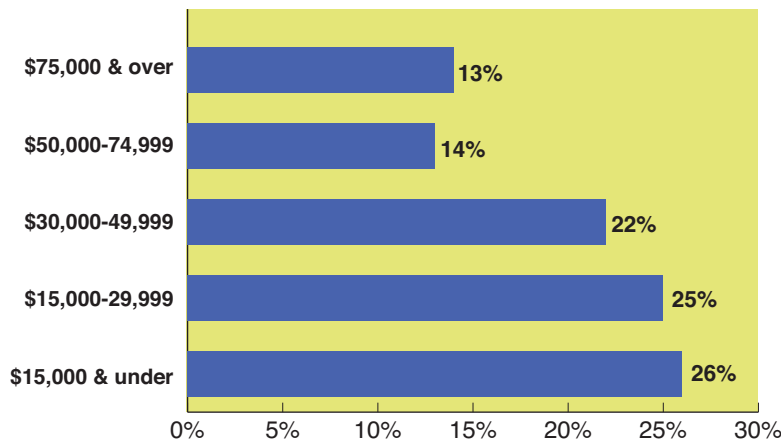
For grandparents, becoming a parent again can create stress.<sup>17</sup> Caregivers have less time for themselves and may feel lonely and isolated from friends who are in the empty-nest stage of life and whose schedules and social life no longer match their own.<sup>18</sup> They may experience grief, guilt, anger, resentment and embarrassment, and may grieve the loss of the usual grandparent role as well as lost dreams for their children’s future.<sup>19</sup>



In addition, grandparents have basic parenting concerns. They need to know how to respond to a grandchild’s feelings of loss, rejection, guilt, anger, embarrassment, divided loyalties and attachment.

Custodial grandparents report more behavior problems than traditional grandparents.<sup>20</sup> Children whose mothers were substance abusers have higher rates of developmental disabilities, creating additional problems for grandparent caregivers.<sup>21</sup>

**Figure 6.** Family income for grandparents—no parent present.



## How does Washburn County fare?

Across the country, the number of grandchildren living with grandparents, with no parent in the household, has grown 51 percent from 1990 to 2003, from 935,000 to 1.42 million.<sup>22</sup>

The following county data can help community leaders address the needs of grandparent caregivers and let caregivers know they are not alone. In Wisconsin, 55,983 grandparents live in households with one or more grandchildren younger than 18. A parent or parents may also live in these households. However, 23,687 Wisconsin grandparents (42 percent) are their grandchildren’s primary caregivers, providing food, shelter, clothing and day care, and sometimes making sure medical and schooling needs are met.

Some children live in households headed by other relatives such as aunts, uncles or siblings over 18. Census data on grandparents raising grandchildren for communities within a Wisconsin county can be found at [www.uwex.edu/ces/flpgrp/map/grgcensusmap.html](http://www.uwex.edu/ces/flpgrp/map/grgcensusmap.html).

### Grandparents caring for grandchildren in Washburn County

	Washburn County	Wisconsin	% in Wisconsin	% in Washburn County
Total children under 18	3,815	1.37 million	26%	24%
Total children living with relatives, including grandparents	161	61,165	4.5%	4.2%
Total grandparents living with children under 18	150	55,983	—	—
Total grandparents living with grandchildren and responsible for their care	67	23,687	42%	45%

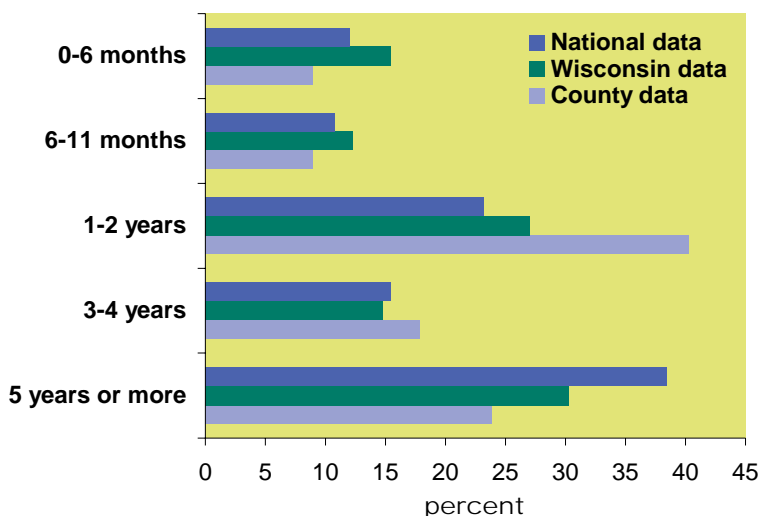
Source: Simmons, T. & Dye, J.L. (2003). Grandparents Living with Grandchildren: 2000. Population figures based on 2000 U.S. Census data.

### Caregiving often lasts five or more years

Grandparents generally do not know how long they will provide care. They often think it will be for a short time, yet a high percentage provide care for five or more years.

Grandparents who are black, Pacific Islander, American Indian or Alaskan native are more likely to have cared for their grandchildren for five years or more compared to Asian, Hispanic or white grandparents.<sup>23</sup>

### Length of time grandparents are responsible for grandchildren



## Grandparents find joy in caregiving

Despite challenges, grandparents say raising grandchildren brings them joy and purpose.<sup>24</sup> Benefits include enjoying their grandchild’s love and affection, having the chance to raise a child differently from the way they raised the middle generation, and being able to nurture and maintain family relationships.<sup>25</sup>

Grandchildren also experience benefits, including having a more stable home environment, adjusting with fewer traumas compared to placement with strangers, and being able to maintain family contacts.<sup>26</sup>

## How can you help?

Communities can support grandparent caregivers in many ways.

### Individuals can:

- Volunteer to help grandparent caregivers through community centers, churches, neighborhood support groups and other organizations.
- Offer companionship and support to grandparent caregivers, help them network with other family caregivers, and put them in touch with social service agencies that can offer additional services and benefits.

### Agencies can:

- Recognize that grandparents face many barriers that keep them from getting professional help, including limited finances, physical disability, lack of child care, unreliable transportation and negative experiences with human service agencies.
- Offer support groups, resources, referrals and emotional support to grandparent caregivers. Provide education on the legal, financial, parenting and personal challenges facing grandparent-headed families to professionals, community leaders and others, via workshops, classes, newsletters, web sites and other technology.
- When counseling grandparents, provide a safe environment, work around last-minute schedule changes, take time to explain programs and services, and reach out to connect caregivers with other services.
- Discuss the larger family, especially the middle generation, and its impact on grandparents and grandchildren.

### Communities can:

- Recognize grandparent-headed families as an important—and growing—family structure, and communicate respect for the family’s strengths.
- Find ways to involve grandparent caregivers in the community through support groups, networks, coalitions, advisory groups and educational efforts.
- Honor the traditions, expectations and experiences of families. Cultural differences enrich the community.



## Community resources for family caregivers

Grandparent caregivers have access to information, educational programs and services through many community and web-based resources. If you don't have a computer, try your local library. Most libraries have a free computer with Internet access. Start with these:

- **AARP** is a national organization for people age 50 and over with state and local chapters. Its "Grandparent Information Center" offers information and referral to support groups and legal services. AARP also offers a newsletter and other publications, some of which are in Spanish.  
[www.aarp.org/families/grandparents/gic](http://www.aarp.org/families/grandparents/gic)
- **Generations United** is the only national organization focusing solely on promoting intergenerational strategies, policies and programs. Their "State Fact Sheets" offers state-specific information on programs and policies.  
[www.gu.org](http://www.gu.org)
- **County and tribal aging offices** answer questions about needs, services and opportunities for older adults who are relative caregivers and their families. To locate your county or tribal aging office, consult:  
<http://dpi.wi.gov/ec/ecwto.html>

- **Books** such as *Robert Lives With His Grandparents* by Martha Whitmore Hickman, and *NanaCat and Her Children: Moving In, and/or NanaCat and Her Children: Someone New*, can be found at your local library along with many other books.
- **University of Wisconsin-Extension offices in every county** provide educational resources through classes, publications and web sites. To locate your county UW-Extension office, visit [www.uwex.edu/ces/cty](http://www.uwex.edu/ces/cty).

Some Extension resources to check out are found in *Grandparenting Today* which lists fact sheets, books, videos, newsletters, web sites and many

other sources of information on grandparents raising grandchildren. You can find it on the web at [www.uwex.edu/ces/flp/grandparent/index.html](http://www.uwex.edu/ces/flp/grandparent/index.html).

- Another Extension resource, a publication series titled *Through the Eyes of a Child: Grandparents Raising Grandchildren* helps grandparents know what to expect and where to turn for support.  
[www.uwex.edu/relationships](http://www.uwex.edu/relationships)



**Notes**

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- <sup>4</sup>Fields, J. (2003). Children's living arrangements and characteristics: March 2002. Retrieved November 7, 2004, from [www.census.gov/prod/2003pubs/p20-547.pdf](http://www.census.gov/prod/2003pubs/p20-547.pdf).
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- <sup>6</sup>Fields, J. Op. Cit.
- <sup>7</sup>Casper, L. M., & Bryson, K. R. (1998). Co-resident grandparents and their grandchildren: Grandparent maintained families. Retrieved November 7, 2004, from [www.census.gov/population/www/documentation/twps0026/twps0026.html](http://www.census.gov/population/www/documentation/twps0026/twps0026.html).
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- <sup>9</sup>Simmons, T., & Dye, J. L. Op. Cit.
- <sup>10</sup>Fields, J. Op. Cit.
- <sup>11</sup>Ehrle, J., & Geen, R. (2002). Children cared for by relatives: What services do they need? Retrieved November 10, 2004, from [www.urban.org/urlprint.cfm?ID=7772](http://www.urban.org/urlprint.cfm?ID=7772).
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- <sup>13</sup>Chalfie, D. (1994). Going it alone: A closer look at grandparents parenting grandchildren. Washington, DC: American Association of Retired Persons, Special Activities Department and Women's Initiative.
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