



## **Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Partnership of Wisconsin**

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### **Grandparents Raising Grandchildren: Looking at the Issue**

There is nothing new about grandparents taking over as parents during a family crisis. This has been done for centuries. What is new, however, are the escalating number of grandparents who are called on to parent their grandchildren. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, approximately 3.2 million children under that age of 18 were living in grandparents' homes in 1990<sup>2</sup> – a 40% increase in just 10 years<sup>2</sup>. By 1997, this number had increased to 4 million<sup>5</sup>. In Wisconsin, estimated 10,500 children live with a grandparent or relative other than their birth parents<sup>6</sup>.

Among the numerous factors contributing to the increase in grandparent caregiving in recent years, substance abuse and AIDS are among the most significant<sup>4</sup>. Drug and alcohol abuse accounts for more than 80% of grandparent families<sup>2</sup>. If trends continue, AIDS will soon rank among the five leading causes of death for women, children and adolescents<sup>3</sup>.

Other factors contributing to the growing number of grandparents raising grandchildren include neglect, abuse or abandonment, teen pregnancy, death, divorce, unemployment, and incarceration.

Most families suffer from a combination of problems. For example, drugs/alcohol problems often are present combined with teen pregnancy, abuse, neglect and abandonment as well as incarceration and murder<sup>2</sup>.

#### ***Demographics***

**Age** – The median age of mid-life and older grandparent caregivers is 57. Seventy-seven percent of the caregivers are between the ages of 45 and 64 while 23% are age 65 and older<sup>1</sup>.

**Sex and Marital Status** – As a group, 60% of grandparent caregivers are grandmothers and 40% are grandfathers. Seventy-five percent of grandparent caregivers are married, 13% are widowed and 7 % are divorced<sup>1</sup>.

**Race and Ethnicity** – The majority (68%) of grandparent caregivers are White while 29% are African-American. Proportionately, however, mid-life and older African-Americans are nearly twice as likely as Whites the same age to be grandparent caregivers.

**Education and income** – Mid-life and older persons in grandparent caregiver households are the least educated of all non-traditional households. Therefore, it is also not surprising that grandparent caregiver households are financially the poorest of all types studied<sup>1</sup>.

**Region** – Grandparent caregiver households are heavily concentrated in the South. The rest are about evenly divided between the Northeast, Midwest and West. Forty percent live in non-metropolitan areas with populations of less than 100,000 persons<sup>1</sup>.

### ***Myths***

There are several common reactions to and assumptions about the issue of grandparents raising grandchildren. These assumptions allow people to rationalize what is happening, pretend that it doesn't apply to them, or blame the victims.

The most common, false assumptions are:

- It's a minority problem.
- It's an urban problem.
- The grandparents were bad parents and get what they deserve.

As was pointed out in the demographics, this issue knows no race or locations. Sometimes grandparents and others often wonder if these problems are the result of something they did which caused their children to behave in such a way. However, most parents do not raise their children to be drug addicts, prostitutes or even irresponsible parents. All parents probably made some mistakes in child-rearing and could have done things differently. However, most parents who are today's grandparents did the best they could with what they knew at the time. When children become adults, they make their own choice<sup>2</sup>.

**Support Groups** - Support groups can be an important resource for grandparents raising grandchildren. There are several support groups in Wisconsin and many more are being established. To find out where these are look at <http://www.uwex.edu/ces/flp/grgp.html>

### ***References:***

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2. deToledo, S. and Brown, D., 1995. **Grandparents as Parents: A Survival Guide for Raising a Second Family**. NY: The Guilford Press.
3. Kornhaber, A., 1996. **Contemporary Grandparenting**. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
4. Minkler, Driver, Roe, and Bedian, 1993. "Community interventions to support grandparent caregivers", **Gerontologist**, V. 33, n. 6.
5. U.S. Census Bureau, March 1997 Population Survey
6. Census Data - to be announced

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