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Grandparents
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Grandparenting in Europe



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The Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation is an international charitable foundation with cultural, educational and social interests. Based in Lisbon with branches in London and Paris, the Foundation is in a privileged position to support transnational work tackling contemporary issues facing Europe. The purpose of the UK Branch in London is to connect and enrich the experiences of individuals, families and communities with a special interest in supporting those who are the most disadvantaged. In 2008, the Foundation launched an initiative on ageing and social cohesion, with a number of activities developed with colleagues in Lisbon. This report represents the latest development of a wide portfolio of work which we hope will contribute to a growing understanding of the impact of demographic ageing on our society.

Overview



With the support of the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, Grandparents Plus is working in partnership with the Institute of Gerontology at King's College London and the Beth Johnson Foundation to explore the role of grandparents within family life across Europe.

Despite the growing importance of grandparenting, we know relatively little about its demography, or about how policies in different European countries support different types of grandparental roles. This leads to two key questions: how does the role of grandparents within family life vary across Europe, and how do different family policy frameworks across Europe help shape the role that grandparents play?

As a first step to addressing these questions, this scoping study reviews the evidence from academic literature on the role of grandparents in Europe. Literature from the US has also been included because of the scale and richness of its evidence base. It also identifies key policies in European countries which are likely to be important in shaping the role of grandparents in family life.

We find that grandparents continue to play an important role in family life, providing help and support to children and grandchildren and also becoming primary caregivers when parents are unable to fulfil this role, for example because of drug and alcohol misuse, severe illness or disability, imprisonment or death.

Despite the pivotal role which grandparents play, legislation and social policies often disregard grandparents' contribution as major supporters or caregivers. However there are examples of progressive policies pursued in a number of European countries that enable families to meet their childcare needs more flexibly, for example by allowing parental leave or allowances to be transferred to a grandparent. As our populations age it is likely that future debate about the policy issues surrounding the grandparental role will become more prominent across Europe.

Changes in grandparenting



Grandparents are likely to become more significant in family life as our populations age.

Children are more likely to have living grandparents

Across Europe increased life expectancy means that there are more older people and it is now much more common for a child to grow up while their grandparents, and even great grandparents, are living. At the same time falling fertility rates mean that the proportion of older people is increasing and there are fewer children per family. A large proportion of children in Europe and other parts of the world will have the opportunity to form long lasting relationships with their grandparents.

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Grandparents are playing an important role in providing childcare

The growth in mothers' participation in the labour market is increasing demands for childcare. This may be leading to a greater role for grandparents in looking after children whilst their mothers are working.

In most European countries there has been a decline in three or more generations of the same family living in the same household, and both the nuclear family and older people are more likely to live independently. Even so, family members are the main source of informal childcare and support, and grandparents play an important role in this.

In many countries there has been a rise in divorce and cohabitation rates and in the number of children born outside of marriage. More children are living in households with just one parent, or in stepfamilies. In many countries lone mothers need to work full-time and are less available to look after their children. Grandparents are more likely to care for grandchildren if the grandchild's parents are divorced.

Grandparents providing financial and practical support to families



It is only when parents and grandparents reach the age of 75 or older that they are more likely to receive than to give help.

Grandparents provide significant practical and financial help to their children and grandchildren. But the intensity and scale of this contribution varies across Europe.

Research shows that in northwest Europe and the US there is frequent contact between older parents and adult children. However there is less involvement in regular transfers of financial and social support (i.e. providing money, practical help and childcare, and living in the same home) than in southern Europe. This is due partly to the greater availability of state support in these countries including welfare benefits, public housing, eldercare and childcare, as well as different cultural norms. In southern Europe, regular transfers between the generations are much more common and the level of state provision of social support is much lower.

Most of the transfers are down the generations, with financial and practical support provided by grandparents to their adult children and grandchildren and it is only when parents and grandparents reach the age of 75 or older that they are more likely to receive than give help.

Analysis of Europe-wide data shows that older people with more resources, for example those with a partner or with higher levels of wealth or educational attainment, are more likely to provide help, while those who are in poor health or single are less likely to provide support. There is a gender difference, with women more likely to provide help than men. Grandparents who have frequent contact with their grandchildren are also more likely to provide financial help.

Grandparents in families with children with special needs and disabilities



Grandparents can be an important source of support for families with a disabled child.

Grandparents may play an important role in families with a disabled child, because of the extra demands and potential stress these families face. Practical, emotional and financial support from grandparents helps families cope and adjust to their situation, and if spatial distance prevents direct practical support, “being there” for the family and listening and offering non-judgemental advice is highly valued.

Research from the US shows that maternal grandmothers can be the most important source of informal support, and that mothers of disabled children who have close relationships with their own mothers experience less stress. Fathers also appreciate grandparental support, especially from their own mothers.

Grandparents may play a particularly important role for working mothers with disabled children, because formal childcare often fails to meet the needs of these families.

Formal childcare often fails to meet the needs of families with disabled children.

Grandparenting and family breakdown



Grandparents are more likely to provide help with the care of grandchildren if parents are separated than if they are together.

Maternal grandparents are often an important source of support for families experiencing divorce or relationship breakdown. Research from the UK shows they are more likely to provide help with care of grandchildren if parents are separated than if they are together.

Grandparents also help children cope with a breakdown in their parents' relationship, with children who are close to their grandparents having fewer emotional or behavioural problems after parental separation. Although closeness between grandparents and grandchildren tends to reduce over time, there is evidence that a good relationship with a grandparent following separation has long lasting benefits, although relationships between adolescents and their peers are also important.

Relationships between grandparents and grandchildren after parental separation are strongly influenced by the closeness of the relationship between the grandparent and the parent with care. Maternal grandmothers may play a greater role; this is most likely due to the fact that lone mothers tend to rely on support from their own mothers. The level of involvement of grandmothers is also affected by the quality of the relationship between the mother and grandmother during the mother's own childhood. Paternal grandmothers are often excluded from family life after their son's divorce or separation. Maternal grandmothers also tend to have less contact with grandchildren after the mother repartners.

Divorced grandparents

Higher divorce rates across all generations mean that grandparents themselves are more likely to experience divorce. Divorced grandparents, or those who have previously been divorced and since remarried, tend to have fewer contacts with their grandchildren, take part in fewer activities with them and say they feel less close to their grandchildren than grandparents who have never been divorced. These negative effects are stronger for grandfathers and paternal grandparents, probably reflecting less close relationships between older people who have experienced divorce and their adult children.

The likely increase in future numbers of divorced older people may have negative implications for the closeness of future generations of grandchildren and grandparents. However as divorce and separation becomes more common it is likely that its effects on family relations may also change in the future.

Grandparents providing childcare



58% of grandmothers and 49% of grandfathers provided childcare in the past year.

Changes in family structures and mothers' participation in the labour market mean the need for childcare will increase.

In the UK around one in three mothers in paid work receives help with childcare from grandparents. Lone parents and mothers from South Asian backgrounds are also particularly likely to rely on grandparents to provide childcare for very young children while they are working. Grandparents are likely to act as a “reserve army” filling in gaps to meet childcare needs. In some European countries levels of grandparental involvement in childcare are high. A pan-European survey shows that 58 per cent of grandmothers and 50 per cent of grandfathers provided regular or occasional childcare in the past year for their grandchildren aged 15 or younger. In the US 43 per cent of grandmothers say they provide regular childcare.

However there are striking differences across Europe in the level and intensity of childcare provided by grandparents. In Italy, Spain and Greece 40 per cent of grandparents provide regular childcare for their grandchildren, compared with 20 per cent of grandparents in Sweden, France and Denmark. On the other hand, more grandparents report providing any childcare in Sweden, France and Denmark, possibly reflecting higher maternal employment rates and grandparents stepping in to provide occasional help to working mothers in those countries, bridging the gap between formal childcare and parental care.

In the US, grandmothers who provide intensive childcare for grandchildren tend to be younger and have more and younger adult children than grandparents who do not provide childcare. They are also more likely to be living with a spouse and to have better health. Grandparents providing intensive overnight childcare, i.e. more than 90 nights per year, are more likely to be married, living close to their children and younger than grandparents who only occasionally provide childcare. They are also more likely to be Black, female and living on low incomes or below the poverty line. Half of all US grandmothers providing intensive childcare live in the same household as their grandchild.

In the UK, less well-qualified working mothers tend to rely most on grandparental help with childcare, with grandchildren under the age of five receiving the most care. While some grandfathers are actively involved in caring for their grandchildren, it is grandmothers who spend the most time looking after them.

Grandparent-headed households



Grandparents who become primary caregivers for their grandchildren are more likely to be in poverty than other grandparents.

In the US there has been a significant rise in the number of children growing up in households headed by a grandparent. This includes both households where three generations are living together, and households where the parent is absent or unable to fulfil their parental role and the grandparent has become the primary caregiver. Grandparents in these families are more likely to be in poverty than other grandparents. This has implications for the children living in those households who in turn face an enhanced risk of poverty.

UK evidence suggests that grandparents form the largest group among family and friends awarded kinship care of children.

Grandparents may take on the role of a parent, either legally or informally, for a range of reasons including parental neglect or abuse, drug or alcohol misuse and mothers' imprisonment or death.

In the US, changes in welfare benefit entitlement introduced in the Welfare Reform Act 1996 are likely to have had the indirect effect of increasing the number of single teenage mothers living with their parents.

There is a lack of evidence about families headed by grandparents in Europe, although evidence from the UK suggests that grandparents form the largest group among family and friends awarded kinship care of children.

Grandparenting and children's wellbeing



Grandparental involvement in children's lives generally has a positive impact on children's wellbeing.

Research from the UK indicates that grandparental involvement is linked to better emotional adjustment and fewer behavioural problems among adolescents. US research shows that children with strong relationships with grandparents have fewer depressive symptoms than those with weak grandparent relationships.

Intensive grandparenting

Evidence on the impact of more intensive grandparental involvement in the lives of grandchildren is mixed. One study from the US found fewer behaviour problems among adolescents living in three generation households, while another found a higher risk of emotional and behavioural problems among children raised by their grandparents. Research from the UK indicates that children in kinship care placements can have good outcomes, particularly where the children are young at the time of placement and have a low level of difficulties. UK research also finds that children in kinship care have often experienced similarly high levels of multiple adverse experiences prior to the placement as those in foster care. It is therefore hypothesised that the children's difficulties may be due to the highly adverse family circumstances which led to the grandparent's involvement.

Childhood obesity

Preschool children from more advantaged backgrounds who are looked after by grandparents are more likely to be overweight than those cared for only by parents. There is also a strong association between grandparental obesity and a child's weight, most likely reflecting both genetic and behavioural factors.

Children in kinship care placements can have good outcomes.

Grandparents' well-being



Grandparents who are primary caregivers are vulnerable to financial hardship.

Active grandparenting may enhance well-being, but very intensive grandparenting is associated with isolation and financial hardship.

Grandparents who actively contribute to families' well-being and provide care and support to grandchildren benefit from an enhanced sense of purpose in life and of family identity, even when they feel emotionally drained by childcare demands.

The evidence on the impact of intensive care and becoming a primary caregiver on grandparents' wellbeing is mixed, with some studies showing negative effects on wellbeing. Research from the US indicates lower levels of preventive health behaviours among grandparents who are raising their grandchildren; however, once the period of adjustment to their new situation is over, grandparents appear to return to previous behaviours directed towards health promotion.

Grandparents raising their grandchildren may lack privacy and leisure time, have less contact with friends and be at risk of isolation. Isolation is also a concern for grandparents providing intensive support to families with a disabled child.

Financial hardship

Grandparents who are primary caregivers are vulnerable to financial hardship, especially if neither parent lives in the household. In the US, grandparents raising their grandchildren are often young grandmothers and are likely to be Black and unmarried. However, grandparents in three generation households are more likely to be younger and working.

Grandparents who are not formally recognised as primary caregivers are worse off financially than those bringing up children within the formal child welfare system in the U.S., and report difficulties in being able to access services such as respite care and legal advice, despite having similar needs.

Grandparents receiving care from grandchildren

When older people experience ill health or bereavement family members, especially partners, are the main providers of support and care. In most European societies there is no evidence that grandchildren are generally involved in providing care for their grandparents. There is little research evidence on when grandchildren do provide care, although a study from the US found that grandchildren in Black and minority ethnic families were more likely to care for a grandparent than White grandchildren.

Lessons from Europe

Family policies with relevance to grandparents



Despite the pivotal role which grandparents play in families, legislation and social policies often disregard grandparents' contribution as major supporters or caregivers.

However there are examples of progressive policies pursued by European states that recognise and in some cases reward grandparent care, for example providing flexibility for parental leave or allowances to be shared with a grandparent, or recognising the particular needs of families with teenage parents.

1. Germany – Parental Leave

In Germany parents are entitled to take leave for up to three years after a child's birth, 12 months of which can be transferred until the child is eight. This leave entitlement may be transferred to a grandparent if the parent is seriously ill or disabled, or if the parent dies. A grandparent can also take the leave if the parent is a teenager or still in full-time education and the parent does not take the leave themselves.

Grandparents who are the primary carer for their grandchild are also entitled to take the leave. Working grandparents are also entitled to take up to ten days paid leave to look after a grandchild in an emergency, or to take unpaid leave of up to six months.

2. Hungary – parental leave and parental allowance

In Hungary parental allowances and parental leave can be transferred to a grandparent if the parents agree and if the child is looked after in the grandparent's home.

3. Portugal – support for grandparents of teenage parents

In Portugal grandparents are entitled to a financial allowance if the mother is aged 16 or younger and the grandparents live together with their grandchild.

Grandparents are also entitled to take up to 30 days a year and receive a financial allowance to care for a sick child, if parents are unable to look after the child because of work commitments or if they have already used up their parental leave entitlement.

4. Denmark – grandmothers care for sick children

In Denmark all public sector and most private sector employers permit a parent to stay at home for the first day of a child's illness, and in practice the grandmother often stays at home the second day.

5. UK – basic state pension National Insurance Credit

From April 2011 UK grandparents who provide childcare for a child under 12 so that parents can work will be able to claim National Insurance credits towards their basic state pension.

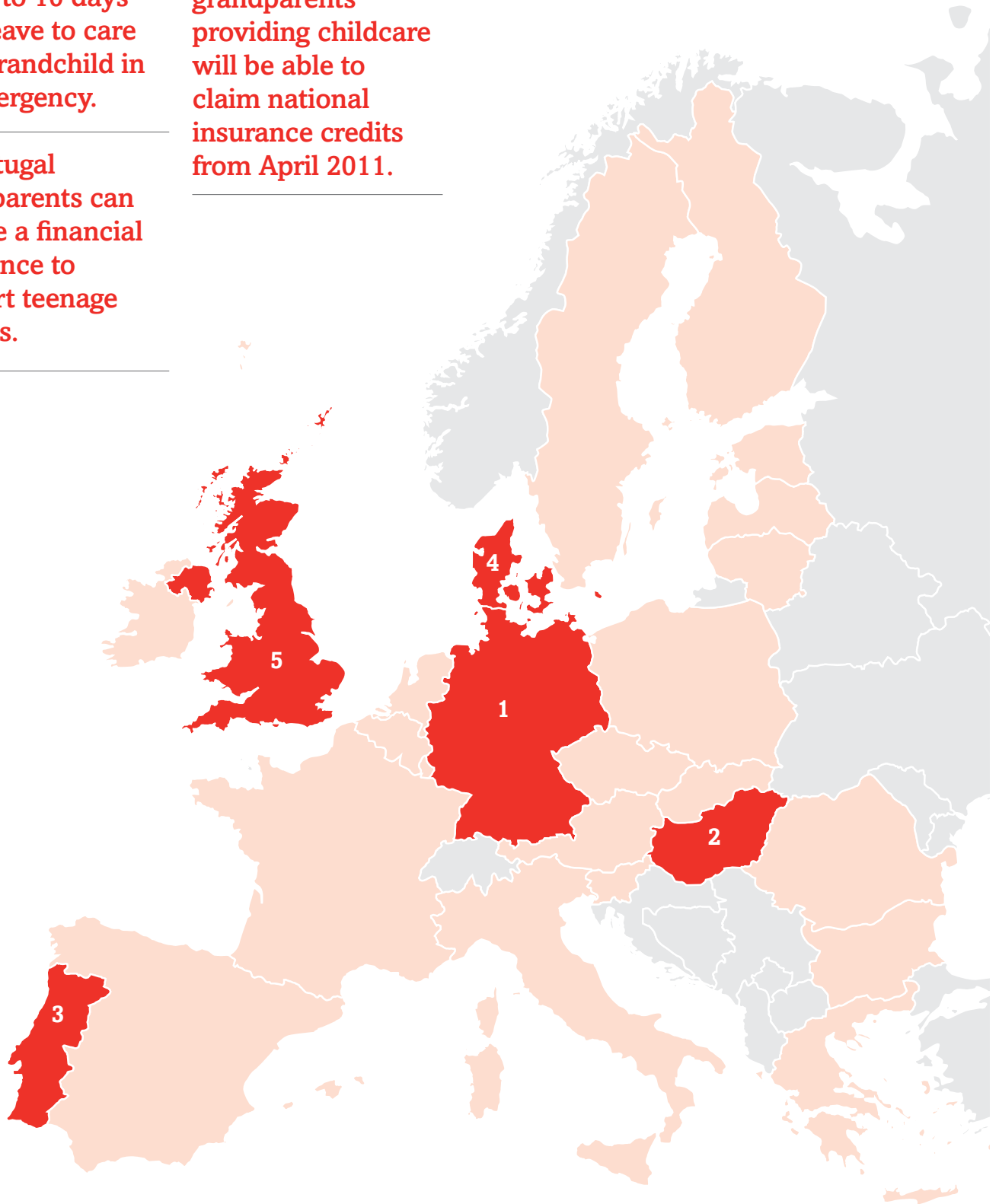
In Germany
parents can
transfer leave to
a grandparent.

Working
grandparents also
get up to 10 days
paid leave to care
for a grandchild in
an emergency.

In Portugal
grandparents can
receive a financial
allowance to
support teenage
parents.

Hungary has
transferable
allowances
and leave.

In the UK
grandparents
providing childcare
will be able to
claim national
insurance credits
from April 2011.



Conclusion



As our populations age and the number of children per family falls, the role of grandparents in family life is becoming increasingly significant. This study shows that this is an international phenomenon and not confined to the UK alone.

The diversity of and pressures on family life, for example with more lone parent families and more mothers working outside the home, are similarly replicated across Europe. But there is wide variation in how different states have responded to these challenges through family policy. In some states the grandparental role is actively recognised and supported. In others the state presumes it is the grandparent's responsibility to support the family and there is little if any formal provision in place.

This scoping study has gathered some useful evidence reviewing existing literature, and developing an overview of family policies across EU countries. Phase two of this study will begin to explore this picture in greater detail. The role grandparents play in family life is likely to become increasingly significant in the years ahead. We need to develop a much better understanding of this changing reality if we are to respond effectively.

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