

Protect, support, provide

Examining the role of grandparents
in families at risk of poverty

The Equality and Human Rights Commission and Grandparents Plus are working in partnership to examine the relationship between older and younger people's poverty through the grandparent-grandchild relationship.

In this report we have focused on several groups particularly vulnerable to poverty (single parent families, families where a child or parent has a disability, black and minority ethnic families and family and friends carers). We explore the shape and nature of deprivation for those grandparents and grandchildren. In particular we consider the scale of grandparents' childcare contribution and how the childcare they provide may increase the risk of poverty for themselves.

This report starts to fill in the gaps in our knowledge and highlights priority areas for future research and policy making.

Families are changing



Grandparents may not be the oldest generation

Increased life expectancy along with falling mortality and fertility rates has resulted in longer, thinner 'beanpole' families, with four or even five generations. This means that there are now also more 'sandwich generation' grandparents who may find themselves caring for older and younger generations.

Families are more complex

There has been a growth in the number of single parent and step families which means that grandparents are facing the challenge of maintaining contact with 'absent' grandchildren, or forming relationships with non-biological ones. In these circumstances grandparents may find they are increasingly becoming the primary source of stability in their grandchildren's lives¹.

7m

grandparents, half of the grandparent population, are aged under 65

Demand for grandparental childcare has increased

The nuclear male breadwinner family is no longer the norm, and we have seen a growth in mothers' labour market participation. Despite increases in formal childcare provision demand for grandparent childcare to enable mothers to enter and remain in employment has increased. This demand is particularly high among low income groups, for whom formal care is prohibitively expensive.

Grandparents today



Approximately 7 million grandparents, half of the grandparent population, are aged under 65; 4.8 million under 60 and 1.5 million under 50². However, there are significant age differences by socio-economic group; for example, working class women are more likely to be young grandmothers (under 50) than middle class women (22% compared to 5%)³.

Grandparents are getting poorer and child poverty remains high

Although the UK is not alone in having high rates of income poverty among the over 65s it does stand out from its Western European neighbours with a rate of 30%⁴. 2.9 million⁵ children were living in low-income households in 2006, a figure unchanged in 2009⁶.

26%

of grandparents
are living in low
income households

The proportion of all grandparents with grandchildren aged under 16 who are living on a low household income (less than £10,000 per year in 2007) increased by almost half between 1998 and 2007 (from 18% to 26%)⁷.

Socio-economic status is the biggest driver of grandparental experiences

Evidence suggests there is a link between the grandparent contribution and managing on a low income; for example, working class mothers are less trusting of formal childcare than others, having a strong preference for family care⁸. They are also more likely to have their children at a younger age.

BSA data indicates that working age, working class grandmothers on low incomes are more likely to be providing childcare than other groups. They are also more likely to have given up work or reduced their paid hours to care for grandchildren⁹. Additionally, although they are not the poorest grandparents (the poorest are those who are dependent on pension income), they are also the group most likely to report that they are finding it difficult to cope financially, suggesting that it may be the struggle of combining work and care which is significant.

Single parent families



Lone parent families are twice as likely as other families to experience hardship¹⁰ and are the most vulnerable to persistent poverty¹¹.

Evidence suggests this is linked to employment status. Although 57% of single parents are now in work¹², this is still significantly lower than the Government's 2010 70% employment target¹³.

Up to

2

out of

3

single parents
in work rely on
grandparents for
childcare

Grandparents' role

Grandparents provide high levels of childcare for single parents¹⁴, with between one half and two thirds of working lone parents reliant on grandparent provided care¹⁵. This is because they offer flexibility, reliability and affordability and because lone parents trust them.

More research is needed on the impact of this contribution on grandparents' finances and well-being, particularly given the Government's policy of encouraging more lone parents back into employment. This may increase pressure on grandparents to step in to provide the childcare at a time when they are also expected to be working to contribute towards their own retirement.

Families with disabled children and/or disabled parents



Families with a disabled child are described as ‘the poorest of the poor’¹⁶ with over half (approximately 770,000 children in total¹⁷), living in or near the margins of poverty¹⁸.

Families with an adult member experiencing health issues and disabilities are also at a heightened risk of poverty, particularly where both parents are affected¹⁹, or the disabled parent is raising a child alone.

Only

16%

of mothers of disabled children are in paid employment

Disability also impacts on a parent’s ability to undertake paid work. This is true of parents with a disability and for those caring for disabled children; for example, over 85% of parents of disabled children want to work, but in practice only 16% of mothers of disabled children are in paid employment compared to 61% of all mothers²⁰.

Grandparents’ role

Although the body of evidence relating to the role of the wider family where a child or parent has a disability is relatively small²¹, we do know that many grandparents play an important role, providing considerable emotional, practical and financial support²², particularly at times of crisis.

Despite this contribution there is a lack of visibility for grandparents in families with either a disabled parent or a disabled child. Their needs are often overlooked, not least by themselves as they repeatedly put their families first. This can leave them feeling unsupported or that they are failing to cope with the situation.

Black and minority ethnic families



Children from a Black Caribbean, Black African, Pakistani and Bangladeshi heritage are more likely to spend part of their childhoods living in poverty than white children, and children from BME families are at particular risk of persistent poverty.

Certain ethnic minority groups, particularly Bangladeshi and Pakistani families are more likely to experience high levels of unemployment. Only 49% of young Muslim women have a job despite the fact that most of them want to work and have the educational qualifications to do so²³. Analysis of the Labour Force Survey between 2001 and 2004 found that just over 25% of Pakistani women and less than 20% of Bangladeshi were economically active, compared with over 70% of white British women, while 15% of Pakistani women and 13% of Bangladeshi were unemployed, compared with just 4% of white British women²⁴.

Concerns have been voiced about a lack of ‘culturally-sensitive’ childcare; indeed working Muslim women are more likely than other ethnic groups to use grandparental childcare as a result of this concern²⁵.

Grandparents’ role

Dominant cultural norms mean that grandparents are often closely involved in their grandchildren’s lives. One key difference between families from different ethnic backgrounds is the increased likelihood of co-residence; that is the grandparent, parent and grandchild living in the same household²⁶. For example over 30% of Indian grandparents live in a multi-generational household²⁷. Whilst there can be considerable advantages to this (for example, the pooling of resources), these may be counteracted by excess pressure on grandparents to undertake high levels of childcare, conflict over child rearing and a loss of privacy²⁸.

We need further evidence across a wide range of black and minority ethnic families in order to better understand the role of grandparents, the impact they have, the differences between different cultures and how cultural identity interacts with socio-economic status.

Over

30%

of Indian
grandparents live in
a multigenerational
household

Family and friends (kinship) carers



It has been estimated that there are more than 200,000 family and friends carers in the UK, most of whom are grandparents²⁹. They are caring for children because parents are no longer able to fulfil that role. This may be because of parental alcohol or substance misuse, abuse or neglect, domestic violence, imprisonment, illness or bereavement or a combination of factors. These factors mean that children living in family and friends care are likely to have special educational needs and/or emotional or behavioural problems³⁰. These families are at particular risk of poverty.

1 in 3

family and friends carers give up work when they take on full-time care

Grandparents' role

When a grandparent becomes their grandchild's parent they often experience considerable emotional trauma and stress, retirement savings may be depleted and grandparents' work arrangements disrupted (one study found that one third of family and friends carers give up work when they take on full-time care³¹ while another 30% reduce their paid hours³²). Thus there is also a link between being a kinship carer and financial hardship. In fact three out of four family and friends carers experience financial hardship as a result of taking on care³³.

Taking on the full-time care of grandchildren may also adversely affect grandparent health³⁴ with grandparent carers more likely than their peers to report difficulties fulfilling daily activities³⁵. This can also impact on a grandparent's ability to undertake paid work.

A lack of visibility for these families at national and local government levels has meant they have not been recognised as a group at risk of poverty. They lack access to the practical and financial support which, in accordance with the Children Act 1989, is only available at the discretion of their local authority rather than determined by their needs or the needs of the child they care for.

Poverty - multiple risk factors



children in family
and friends care
have a disability

Families can often experience a number of factors which increase their chances of living in poverty. For example, one in seven children cared for by grandparents (14%) have a disability compared to one in 20 (5%) of the wider population³⁵. One in three (35%) kinship (family and friends) carers are living without a partner. Single parents in hardship are 1.7 times more likely to experience worsened hardship if they belong to a minority ethnic group³⁶. Three in 10 lone parents have a sick or disabled child³⁷.

Conclusion

We know from evidence on the intergenerational patterns of poverty (for example, the higher incidence of lone motherhood among those who grew up in low income households³⁸) that grandparents in the families we have focused on here are more vulnerable to poverty themselves. Yet despite this we find that they make a significant contribution to the lives of their families, protecting them from the adverse effects of poverty, supporting them through hardship and providing for them both practically and financially.

This report therefore begins to highlight the role of grandparents in families at risk of poverty, one that is significant but little understood, and points to the need to ensure this role is recognised by policy makers and service providers, highlighting areas for concern as we go forward.

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We champion the wider
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