

KINSHIP CARE IN WASHINGTON STATE: A HISTORICAL COMPARISON

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About Partners for Our Children

Partners for Our Children (P4C) was founded in 2007 to focus new thinking, resources and expertise on the state’s child welfare system. We are a first-of-its-kind collaboration between the state Department of Children, Youth, and Families, the University of Washington School of Social Work and private sector funding. The mission of P4C is to combine the strengths of a public research university with resources from the private sector to improve outcomes for vulnerable children and families touched by Washington’s public child welfare system. We advance our mission through three interrelated tasks: system level research, data and analytic support, and public policymaking. As an independent entity with both the research assets of a major university and strong relationships with policy makers, we are in a unique position to research and evaluate the effects of policy choices and practice changes in the public child welfare system. We analyze data from the Department of Children, Youth, and Families to better understand trends within the system, and when possible, combine it with data from related systems (courts, education, etc.) to create a more complete picture of how the child welfare system operates. Findings ultimately provide critical decision support for lawmakers and agency staff. Finally, we provide non-partisan input on proposals and legislation related to children and families in Washington state and at the federal level – and whenever possible, we bolster public policy discussions with solid research evidence and data.

This report is a result of a partnership between UW, Adult Long-Term Services Administration (AL TSA), and the Department of Children, Youth and Families (DCYF), and the authors would like to thank our external partners for their valuable collaboration, comments, and support. Data collection results from this survey will inform the modification of a statewide kinship navigation program manual for consistent statewide use by navigators as well as inform future program and resource development.

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Executive Summary

Kinship caregivers provide care for relatives' children and serve an essential role in child welfare. This report describes the demographics, prevalence, legal framework, and unique challenges experienced in kinship caregiving and describes the findings from surveys completed by kinship caregivers in 2002 and 2020.

In Washington State, kinship caregivers who completed statewide surveys in both 2002 and 2020 primarily identified as white, female, grandparents, and over the age of 50. Kinship caregivers in both years reported income ranges less than the state-level median income at their respective time points. Demographic differences did exist between participants in the two samples in regard to the length of time they had cared for children and the age of children in their care. In 2002, respondents reported an average of 5.8 years of kinship caregiving, while in 2020 participants reported an average of 6.71 years. In 2002, respondents reported an average age of 9.5 for the children in their care, while those in 2020, reported an average age of 12.8.

Participants in 2002 and 2020 answered questions identifying their top three unmet needs, challenges, and sources of help. Due to question wording differences, this report summarizes, but does not compare the findings for unmet needs and sources of support identified by kinship caregivers. Regarding challenges, the top three challenges identified in 2002 and 2020 remained the same- finances, emotional health, and the child's behavior.

Given that kinship caregivers in both time points indicated that finances were a concern, policymakers should consider ways to increase financial support for this population, including increasing financial parity between formal and informal caregivers. One major step in this direction would be to ensure TANF child only payments are more in line with foster care payments when kinship placements are created because of an abuse and neglect substantiation.

Definitions of terms

- *Adoption*. The legal process by which children join a family, where they will not be raised by their birth parents (CB, n.d.).
- *Aging and Long-Term Support Administration (AL TSA)*. Responsible for providing services and supports to older adults. individuals who are functionally and financially eligible to receive such services (DCYF, n.d.).
- *Caregiver*. A general term describing a person who cares for a child and is not their biological parent.
- *Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF)*. A cabinet level agency focused on the wellbeing of children (DCYF, n.d.).
- *Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS)*. Washington State's social service agency for children, families, and adults in need (DSHS, n.d.).
- *Durable power of attorney*. An agreement by which a parent designates a trusted caregiver to make legal and medical decisions for a child (HCA, 2016).
- *Economic Services Administration (ESA)*. A part of the Department of Social and Health Services that provides assistance with cash, food, child support, disability determination, transition to employment, and other services (ESA, n.d.).
- *Formal Kinship Care*. In this type of Kinship care, children are placed in the legal custody of the state by a judge, and the child welfare agency then places the children with a relative. - pdf citation
- *Foster parent*. Adults who provide a temporary home for children in their care. They may be relatives or non-relatives of the children and must be licensed caregivers (CB, n.d.).
- *Guardianship*. A judicially determined relationship in which an adult cares for a child and assumes parental responsibility, without the termination of parental rights (CB, n.d.).
- *Informal Kinship Care*. Relative placements arranged by parents and other family members without any involvement from either the child welfare agency or the juvenile court.
- *Kinship care*. Full-time care provided by a child's relative or close family friend (CB, n.d.).
- *Kinship navigator programs*. Resource and referral programs offered by states to kinship caregivers in order to increase knowledge of and access to services (Casey family programs, 2018).
- *Non-parental custody (also known as third party custody)*. An agreement where someone other than a child's parents, with close ties to a child, assumes legal custody of the child's physical, medical, and emotional needs (Legal Voice, 2017).
- *Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) child-only grant*. Funds granted to the child on behalf of the government, which are based on the child's income (Legal Voice, 2017).
- *Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) needy family grant*. Governmental funds that can be granted for up to 60 months to the child and caregiver, which are based on the incomes of the children and adults in the household (Legal Voice, 2017).
- *Unlicensed relative caregivers*. Relative placements where the household has not been licensed by the state.

Introduction

Washington's Kinship Navigator program has enjoyed legislative support and growth over the past 15 years since it was first implemented in 2005. In order to promote family stability, Kinship Navigators provide kinship families with assistance in applying for state and federal benefits, as well as information and referrals for services to address their specific needs. These services promote knowledge and awareness of available resources for health, financial, legal, and other support services such as local support groups, kinship closets, legal clinics, and free family recreational passes. In addition to providing information and referral services, Kinship Navigators also help to reduce barriers faced by kinship families through problem solving and collaboration with public, private, local, and state service providers.

This report provides a picture of kinship caregiving in Washington State. To provide that picture, this report includes summary of relevant legislative history impacting kinship caregivers, a description of kinship care, and the results from surveys completed by samples from Washington State kinship caregivers in 2002 and 2020.

Legislative Background

In order to describe the current state of kinship caregiving in Washington State, it is imperative to first understand the legislation that led to the present-day programs and policies that impact kinship caregivers. This section summarizes legislation relevant to kinship caregivers from 1978 to 2018.

Legislation

1978 Indian Child Welfare Act. The Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) was the first Federal law to officially recognize kinship care. The ICWA requires states to place Indian American children near their home and with extended family whenever possible (NICWA, 2020).

1980 Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act. The Federal Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act, passed in 1980, recommends that children be placed near the parents' house in the least restrictive setting available (Corman, 1980).

1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act. The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) is a federal act passed in 1996, reforming the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program. PRWORA requires states to prioritize relative placements for children. The act also allows the state to use Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) funds for licensed and unlicensed kinship caregivers, irrespective of whether the child is eligible for foster care payments. (Kasich, 1996).

1997 Adoption and Safe Families Act. The Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) passed in 1997 states that relatives can provide stable placements for children. They are excused from some requirements of AFSA, such as the time frames for termination of parental rights (Camp, 1997).

2000 Older Americans Act. The Older Americans Act (OAA) of 2000 was reauthorized to establish the National Family Caregiver Support Program (NFCSP) which gives funding to states for Area Agencies on Aging (AAA). The funds are used to support kinship caregivers over the age of 60 and caregivers for the elderly (Barrett, 2000).

- 2008 *Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act.*** The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act was passed at the federal level in 2008. It amended parts of the Social Security Act with goals of supporting kinship caregivers to improve resources, outcomes, and incentives for children in foster care and access to adoption. It allocated grants to implement a kinship navigator program in order to support kinship caregivers to support the children in their care as well as themselves (McDermott, 2008).
- 2011 *Child and Family Services Improvement and Innovation Act.*** The Child and Family Services Improvement and Innovation Act (CFIIA) was passed in 2011 and encouraged placements that kept siblings together in the same foster care or kinship guardianship placement. It also established a kinship navigator program with specific efforts to increase resources for family counseling, reduce wait times for substance abuse treatment for families, and addressing domestic violence that endangers infants (Davis, 2011).
- 2018 *Family First Prevention Services Act.*** The Family First Prevention Services Act provides states with access to funds for prevention services, aimed at helping children stay with their parents or relatives (NCSL, 2020). The FFPSA also provides funding for kinship navigator programs, which aim to increase kinship caregivers' access to resources and support through the use of a "navigator".
- 2018 *Supporting Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Act.*** The Supporting Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Act (SGRG) is federal act passed in 2018 and recommends that relatives should be given preference for placement as it gives higher stability and opportunities to form connections. SGRG established an advisory council to provide resources to support grandparents or older relatives that are kinship caregivers (Collins, 2018).

What Is Kinship Care?

Kinship care is the full-time care of children in the home of a relative. Over the last few decades, the number of relatives taking temporary and permanent responsibility for raising children with or without aid from child welfare agencies has increased across the United States.

Some relatives take in children informally, when there is a family emergency for prolonged periods of time, while others become foster parents, take on legal guardianship, or adopt. Kinship care can be informal (taking place without state involvement) or formal (arranged/supervised by the state).

Kinship care can provide a sense of stability and security to children, such as fewer instances of school and neighborhood changes than in foster care, which leads many researchers to argue that kinship caregiving arrangements should be considered the preferred placement option for children whose parents cannot care for them (Winokur & Batchelder, 2015; Gleeson, 1999). Kinship caregiving arrangements result in fewer placement disruptions and are generally seen as more financially effective for the state than foster care placements (Littlewood, 2015).

Informal kinship caregivers are eligible for a few different types of financial resources, such as the Temporary Assistance for Needy Family (TANF) Child-Only Grant, which provides government funds for children in kinship care. Caregivers may also be eligible for time-limited governmental funds based on their income. Additional financial support for kinship caregivers can come from the Kinship Caregivers Support Program (KCSP), which provides state funding for basic needs on a short-term basis. KCSP grants are annually limited to \$2500 per caregiver

and TANF grants provide \$363 for the first child per month (the amount provided is higher for the first child and lower for each additional child). The Economic Services Administration (ESA) also works with the Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF) to provide supports for kinship caregivers. These funds are less than the financial supports provided to foster parents in Washington State. Formal kinship families who are not licensed are eligible for non-need, child-only TANF. While formal kinship families do not receive monthly foster care reimbursements, they may be eligible for childcare. Medical coverage is also available to informal caregivers whose dependents are Medicaid eligible. Formal kinship caregivers are eligible for certain types of mileage reimbursement and a very limited amount of clothing support, such as a clothing voucher (DCYF, n.d.).

Methodology

This report describes the results from two statewide reports of kinship caregivers in Washington State, published in 2002 and 2020. Washington State Institute of Public Policy (WSIPP) published the first statewide report on kinship caregivers in 2002 (Mayfield, Pennucci, & Lyon, 2002). WSIPP's report included results from a survey completed by kinship caregivers (N=750) in Washington State (Mayfield, Pennucci, & Lyon, 2002b). This survey asked kinship caregivers questions regarding their demographics, their caregiving arrangements, as well as their challenges and needs, and their greatest sources of support. WSIPP distributed surveys to members of support groups, mailed surveys to families who received TANF child-only grants and were headed by relative caregivers, and mailed surveys to open child welfare cases with kinship care placements. The survey included questions regarding demographics and the nature of the kinship caregiving arrangement. The survey also asked participants to select their top three challenges, sources of help, and unmet needs from a list of options.

Partners for Our Children (P4C) finalized a report about kinship caregivers in Washington State in 2020. This report includes the results of a statewide survey of kinship caregivers, in which kinship caregivers answered demographic questions, as well as questions about their greatest challenges, unmet needs, and sources of support. Participants were recruited through mass mailings developed in partnership with the three major state department offices responsible for providing services to kinship caregiving families across the state of Washington, which include DCYF, ALTA, and ESA (the TANF office where child-only TANF benefits are distributed). Similar to the 2002 survey, participants answered questions regarding their demographics, the nature of the kinship caregiving arrangement, and selected their top three challenges, sources of help, and unmet needs from provided lists.

The reports from 2002 and 2020 differ in several key respects. Demographic questions and response options differ for factors such as gender identity, race, ethnicity and sources of income. The 2020 survey provides an option for participants to select "other" for gender, separates race and ethnicity into two separate categories, and includes additional sources of income not listed on the 2002 survey. Kinship caregiving placement questions also differ between the two surveys. The 2020 survey asks provides participants with additional options for describing the nature of the relationship to the child in the caregivers' care, the type of kinship caregiving placement, and the circumstances that led to raising the kinship child. While the 2020 and 2002 surveys provided the exact same wording and response options for the question, "Please check three issues that present the greatest challenges related to raising the kinship children who are currently in your care,"

different response choices were listed for the questions on unmet needs and sources of help in the two surveys.

While the two surveys differ in some questions and response options, comparing the similar questions from two different time periods can provide meaningful insight into certain aspects of kinship caregiving in Washington State and how caregiver experiences and circumstances may have changed from 2002 to 2020. When possible, this report will compare the results from the two surveys. When methodological differences exist in question wording to an extent when a direct comparison is not possible, the results from each survey will be summarized and not compared.

Results

Prevalence

In Washington state, kinship caregivers are most commonly grandparents - a consistent observation in 2002 (73%) and in 2020 (71%). In 2002, 89% of the total kinship care placements were informal. Following a similar trend, in 2020, 84% of kinship care arrangements were informal.

Characteristics

The reports from 2002 and 2020 both reported the demographics of kinship caregivers. This section summarizes the characteristics of the populations surveyed in 2002 and 2020.

Kinship caregivers in both studies were predominantly women. In 2002, 87% of the respondents identified as women. In 2020, 90% of the respondents identified as women. Kinship caregivers reported an average age of 54 in 2002 and 58 in and in 2020. In 2002, the majority (76%) of kinship caregivers identified as white, while other respondents identified as African American (9%), American Indian/Alaskan Native (9%), and “other” (6%). In 2020 80% of kinship caregivers identified as white, 8% identified as American Indian/Alaskan Native, and 8% identified as African American caregivers.

In order to compare similar income ranges, the 2002 income ranges are presented before adjusting for inflation. Before adjusting for inflation, 39% of respondents in 2002 reported an income of less than \$20,000, 34% reported an income between \$20,000 and \$39,999, 17% reported an average income of \$40,000-\$59,999, and 10% reported an average income above \$60,000.¹ Thus, the majority of respondents in 2002 reported an income less than the median wage in Washington State during that time period (\$44,252) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2003).

In 2020, 31% of respondents reported an income of less than \$20,000, 28% reported an income between \$20,000-\$39,999, 17% reported an income between \$40,000 and \$59,999, and 24% reported an income above \$60,000. Similar to 2002, the majority of respondents reported an income lower than the state median income (\$73,775) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019).

Kinship caregivers in 2020 cared for older children and cared for children for longer periods of time than those in 2002. In 2002, kinship caregivers reported an average of 5.8 years of kinship

¹After adjusting for inflation, in today’s dollars, 39% of respondents in 2002 reported an income of less than \$28,000, 34% reported an income between \$28,000 and \$57,000, 17% reported an average income of \$57,000 to \$85,500, and 10% reported an average income of above \$85,000.

caregiving. Kinship caregivers in 2020 reported an average of 6.7 years of kinship caregiving. In 2002, the average age of children in the respondents' care was 9.5 years old, while in 2020, the average age was 12.8 years old.

2002 challenges, unmet needs, and sources of help

Challenges. In 2002, the top three challenges selected by kinship caregivers were finances (48%), the child's emotional health (30%), and the child's behavior (26%). Kinship caregivers in 2020 identified the same top three challenges in 2020 (finances: 36%, child's emotional health: 32%, and the child's behavior: 27%). The persistence of finances as a challenge aligns with the finding that in both time points, the majority of respondents reported incomes below the state median income level.

Unmet needs. In 2002, the three most selected unmet needs included information about programs (35%), financial support (30%), and legal assistance (25%). When provided with slightly different response options in 2020, kinship caregivers most frequently selected financial support (35%), recreational and social activities for the child (31%), and respite care (23%).

Sources of help. In 2002, the three most selected sources of help included the caregivers' spouse (47%), other relatives (43%), and public social services (42%). When provided with slightly different response options in 2020, kinship caregivers most frequently selected their spouse/partner (42%), relatives (35%), and public social services (35%).

Summary

The results described in this report summarize the kinship caregiver's demographics, stated challenges and unmet needs in 2002 and 2020. Kinship care has increased in the United States in general, and the majority of kinship caregiving arrangements remain informal. Kinship caregivers in Washington State in 2002 reported finances as a challenge, and this concern was also reported in the 2020 observation period. We recommend that policymakers consider ways to increase the support for kinship caregivers, especially since respondents reported incomes lower than the state's median wage in both 2002 and 2020. While the 2002 survey provided participants with the option of selecting information gaps as an unmet need, this response option did not exist in 2002. Given that one of the many goals of the kinship navigator program is to reduce information gaps for kinship caregivers, further inquiry is needed to understand whether the information gap persists as an unmet need in 2002.

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