

# Safety net fails grandmother caregivers living in severe poverty

December 17 2015, by Deborah Bach

---

Increasing numbers of grandmothers across the United States are raising their grandchildren, many of them living in poverty and grappling with a public assistance system not designed to meet their needs.

LaShawnDa Pittman, an assistant professor in the University of Washington's Department of American Ethnic Studies, interviewed 77 African American grandmothers living in some of the poorest areas of south Chicago. Her findings were published in November in the first issue of *The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences*.

Pittman's research underscores the challenges those caregivers face, including dealing with divided loyalties between their [grandchildren](#) and their own [children](#), navigating the complications of getting state resources they desperately need and sacrificing their own well-being in their determination to take care of their grandchildren.

The majority of the grandmothers Pittman interviewed, who ranged in age from 38 to 83, had annual incomes of less than \$15,000, though more than half were employed. Fifty-eight were raising children in informal arrangements and were ineligible for funding under the state child welfare system. Benefits available to parents were also often out of reach, and public assistance aimed at seniors was inadequate to cover the costs of childrearing.

"They fell through the cracks in ways that have real ramifications for them," Pittman said.

And their ranks have swelled. The number of children living with a grandparent in the U.S. has increased by 22 percent since 2000, rising sharply during the Great Recession. The rise can be attributed to a host of factors, from incarcerated parents to unemployment, inadequate mental health services and substance abuse, Pittman said.

Grandparents are now the primary caregivers for more than 2.9 million children nationwide, Pittman notes, and two-thirds of grandmother-headed households live at or below the federal poverty line. Black children are twice as likely to live with grandparents or other relatives as are white and Hispanic children, but Pittman said since the Great Recession, white grandparents are now the fastest-growing subset of grandparent-headed households.

Pittman's paper highlights the strategies grandmothers devised to keep grandchildren in their care without jeopardizing subsidized housing, such as keeping children's names off leases to avoid being disqualified for senior housing. In some cases, grandmothers were not getting benefits available to them or were jumping through unnecessary hoops to access services because they were misinformed.

In most situations, parents either failed or refused to contribute financially to their children's care. In one case, a daughter left her mother to care for her 2-year-old daughter without transferring the child's public assistance payments—leaving her mother without any formal support or income. And in some cases, parents removed or tried to remove their children from a grandmother's care to get subsidized housing or resources the child was eligible for.

Child care was another challenge. One grandmother quit her job because she couldn't find child care and had to rely on unemployment income and help from friends. Another was prevented from seeking a job because she couldn't afford child care. She couldn't get subsidized care,

since she wasn't her grandchild's public assistance payee, and transferring those payments might have jeopardized the child's safety if her mother took her back to claim the benefits.

"We often think of grandmothers as child care providers, but when they're parenting children, they're also child care consumers," Pittman said. "So how do they acquire [child care](#) for their grandchildren when they're normally the people that parents leave the children with?"

Pittman conducted her research while pursuing a doctoral degree at Northwestern University. She initially set out to investigate the support networks available to inner-city children, and grandmothers kept coming up in her research. She spent the better part of four years visiting grandmothers in their homes, accompanying them to doctor's appointments, going to church with them.

Pittman was struck by the magnitude of their poverty and the poor health many were in—she recalled one grandmother in her forties who had her granddaughter leave the front door unlocked for Pittman because she was unable to get down a flight of stairs to open it.

"I was interviewing grandmothers who were raising grandchildren from recliners because they could barely get around," Pittman said. "I was talking to 40- and 50-year-olds who could barely walk, for a variety of reasons."

But Pittman also noted the resilience of many of the grandmothers.

"Even though raising their grandchildren is really hard, they wouldn't have it any other way," she said. "One of the big things I heard was, 'My grandbaby won't end up in the system. If that means I've got to make these kinds of sacrifices, that's just what it's going to be.'"

Some efforts are trying to address the shift in demographics. Kinship Navigator Programs have been established in about 15 states, including Washington, to help connect intergenerational caregivers with services and deal with complex family dynamics.

Pittman said while the kinship programs provide a valuable service, more resources are needed to help the millions of grandparents struggling to raise their grandchildren.

"Our current safety net programs aren't set up to deal with this increasingly common situation," Pittman said.

"Understanding people's challenges and experiences is the first step to rethinking how we might better serve some of our most vulnerable households."

**More information:** [www.rsfjournal.org/doi/full/10.7758/RSF.2015.1.1.05](http://www.rsfjournal.org/doi/full/10.7758/RSF.2015.1.1.05)

Provided by University of Washington

Citation: Safety net fails grandmother caregivers living in severe poverty (2015, December 17) retrieved 25 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2015-12-safety-net-grandmother-caregivers-severe.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.