

Poverty Research Flash

Highlighting New Poverty Research

by LaShawnDa Pittman

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The West Coast Poverty Center's **POVERTY RESEARCH FLASH** highlights new research by faculty affiliates and others on causes, consequences, and effective policy responses to poverty, with an emphasis on changing labor markets, demographic shifts, family structure, and social and economic inequality.

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Doing What's Right for the Baby: Parental Responses and Custodial Grandmothers' Institutional Decision-Making

Background: More than 5 million children live with grandparent caregivers. An increasing number of these children are in skipped-generation households with no parent present for reasons including parental death, incarceration, and parental neglect or abuse. These arrangements vary from more to less formal with respect to their permanence and legal custody. Informal care with no child welfare system involvement is the most common arrangement. Formal adoption, which provides permanent legal guardianship, is the other extreme but is much less common. This study examines the role of family dynamics in shaping how families choose a type of care arrangement and the implications of different arrangements for families' material needs.

Methods: Based on in-depth interviews with 50 low-income, custodial black grandmothers in the Chicago area, WCPC Affiliate and Assistant Professor of American Ethnic Studies LaShawnDa Pittman explored how parents' reactions to child welfare threats experienced by their children shaped the type of institutional arrangement that grandparent caregivers sought. Pittman focused on black grandmothers in particular because of black families' overrepresentation among grandparent-headed households and among skipped-generation households in particular. Black grandmothers are more likely than grandparents of other races to be asked to provide care for their grandchildren. As a demographic group, older black women are particularly likely to be poor- or near-poor and marginalized on the basis of age, race, gender, and geographic location from different structural systems (e.g., schools, public benefits, child welfare, labor market) involved in providing and caring for children. Interviewees ranged in age from 38 to 83 years old; included working, retired, and unemployed caregivers; and represented care-types ranging from informal care to adoption.

Findings: The interviews revealed that grandmothers decided to provide care for their grandchildren when those children faced threats to either their safety or developmental needs, or when grandchildren were at risk of being placed in state custody. Pittman characterized parental reactions to the loss of custody of their children as falling into five categories, each of which corresponded to a set of actions by caregivers. For example, responsive parents were actively working to remove barriers to regaining custody. Based on those efforts, grandmother caregivers worked with parents to achieve reunification and tended to avoid formalizing custody arrangements. More negative parental reactions, such as resistance to ceding parental rights even when it seemed to be in the best interests of the children, often provoked caregivers to seek more formal, institutionalized roles to protect the children and ensure their status as caregivers.

The type of institutional arrangement (or the lack thereof) that grandparents choose affects their ability to navigate institutions such as schools, medical providers; cash and non-cash benefits available to the child and/or family; and the degree of control grandparents have while providing care. Of potential importance to these low-income families, informal arrangements leave grandparents without access to benefits for which they (or the children in their care) might be eligible. Interviewees weighed this loss against the risks of parental resistance if they sought a formal arrangement. For instance, as a result of this risk, one interviewee with an informal care arrangement revealed that she allowed an unresponsive parent to maintain access to a child's public assistance benefits to avoid a confrontation with the parent.

This research shows how these grandmothers took into account the children's parents' actions when determining how best to try to care for their grandchildren, either more or less formally. Although federal child welfare and public assistance policies have changed to promote relative care, policies and procedures have not changed to reflect the complicated realities that are often created by these types of kinship placements or the economic disadvantage of many of the caregivers providing care for their grandchildren. Pittman offers several suggestions for how policy and practice changes could help grandparents to provide a secure safety net for their grandchildren while still promoting parental reunification where possible.