

## FRONTIER EDUCATION CENTER - ISSUES BRIEF

### **Grandparents Raising Grandchildren: Caring for Children in the Frontier**

**December 2004**

Grand-parenting. Custodial grandparents. The lost (or skipped) generation. Kinship care. These terms, though varying in specificity and perspective, denote a disturbing trend in caring for the nation's children: grandparents are increasingly becoming responsible for raising their children's children.

According to the 2000 Census, more than 2.4 million grandparents in the U.S. reported having primary caretaking responsibility for at least one grandchild, with 4.5 million children being cared for by a grandparent<sup>1,2</sup>. However, many grandparents who are in fact raising their grandchildren do so informally, without legal rights or recognition. Because they may fear revealing this information to a federal agency, the actual numbers may be higher.

Although grandparents raising grandchildren (GRG) is not a new phenomenon, for the first time in 2000, the U.S. Census long form included a question on grandparents who lived with and who were responsible for their grandchildren. In 2000, grandparents under the age of 60, women, and African American, Pacific Islander, and Native American/Alaska Native ethnicity were most likely to be responsible for grandchildren<sup>1</sup>. Other ethnic groups with a high rate of co-resident grandparents (Hispanic, Asian) were less likely to be responsible for the grandchildren. Grandparent-maintained households also had higher poverty rates (19%) than for all households with related children present (14%).

**Growth of grandparenting.** The percentage of children under 18 living in a grandparent-headed household increased from 3% in 1970, to 5% in 1992, to 5.5% in 1997<sup>3</sup>. The "skipped generation" household, or one where the grandparent is raising the grandchild where neither parent is present, had the highest rate of growth between 1992 and 1997, when 11% of grandparents reported having assumed primary caregiving of grandchildren for at least six months at some time<sup>4</sup>.

A number of factors result in grandparents assuming responsibility for their grandchildren; usually, more than one factor is involved in the decision to assume the parenting role. Personal factors resulting in the parents' inability to properly care for the children include substance abuse, teenage parenthood, divorce, death of one or more parent, incarceration, unemployment and/or labor-related migration, mental and/or physical disability, and more recently, military deployment.

Cultural factors also play an important role in both the prevalence of custodial grandparenting and the meaning and experience of raising one's grandchild. Among the Native American/Alaska Native groups, grandparents are, by tradition, expected to play a major role in the raising of grandchildren; children are believed to benefit from intergenerational caretaking, and there is less stigma and more social acceptance for grandparents who assume responsibility

for their grandchildren. Similarly, among African American populations, grandmothers traditionally play a significant role in raising grandchildren, whether or not they have primary responsibility. As Native Americans and African Americans share a tragic history of forced familial separations, kinship care can be seen as a “time-honored, cherished family response”<sup>5</sup>.

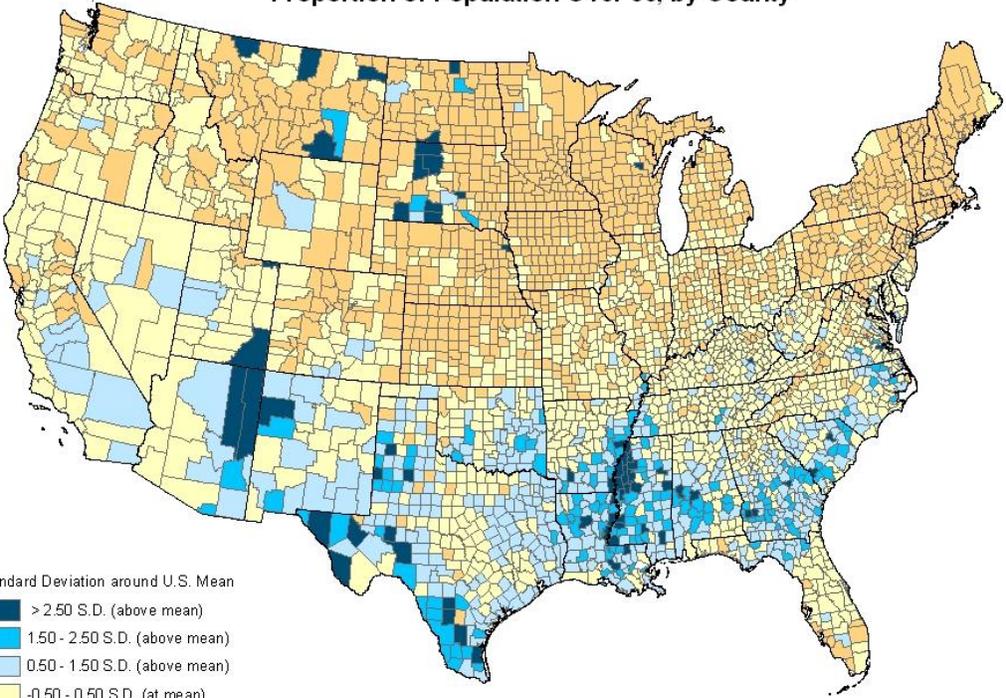
Among Hispanic and Asian American groups, while it is common for three generations to live in the same household, it is still expected that parents have primary responsibility for children; there is greater stigma attached when a grandparent assumes the role of parent. European American grandparents are less likely to live with their children’s families or to assume an active role in the raising of grandchildren; for these grandparents, assuming the parental role for their grandchildren represents a major change in lifestyle and expectations for their own role in their later years. Nonetheless, data indicate that the grandparenting phenomenon cuts across all racial/ethnic, socioeconomic, and regional lines.

Policy may also have played a role in the increase in number of custodial grandparents<sup>6</sup>. Although policies vary from state to state, grandparents are now seen as the best placement option by foster care agencies, although aunts and uncles and other relatives are also assuming the care for these children in greater numbers as well. Over the past decade, many child welfare agencies have established “kinship care,” or the placement of children with relatives, as the preferred option for children needing short- or long-term foster care or adoption placements. Moreover, “a number of Federal and State court rulings have recognized the rights of relatives to act as foster parents and to be compensated financially for doing so”<sup>7</sup>.

### **Regional Variation in Grandparent Caregiving**

In its 2003 brief, “Grandparents Living With Grandchildren: 2000,” the U.S. Census Bureau reported that the West Region (including Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Hawaii, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon, Utah, Washington and Wyoming) had the highest proportion of co-resident grandparents and grandchildren (4.3% of adults over the age of 30), but the South region (Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, West Virginia, and the District of Columbia) had the highest proportion of grandparents as primary caregivers (48% of coresident grandparents). Both of these regions contain “frontier states” or states with a high proportion of territory designated as “frontier,” areas with low population densities and long distances from urban areas<sup>1</sup>. A map of the rates of grandparenting at the county-level reveals concentrations of grandparents raising grandchildren in the South (particularly in the Mississippi River Valley region), along the Texas border with Mexico, in Alaska, and in scattered counties in the Rocky Mountain and Plains states (Figures 1-4).

**Figure 1: Grandparents Responsible for Grandchildren, 2000  
Proportion of Population Over 30, by County**



Standard Deviation around U.S. Mean

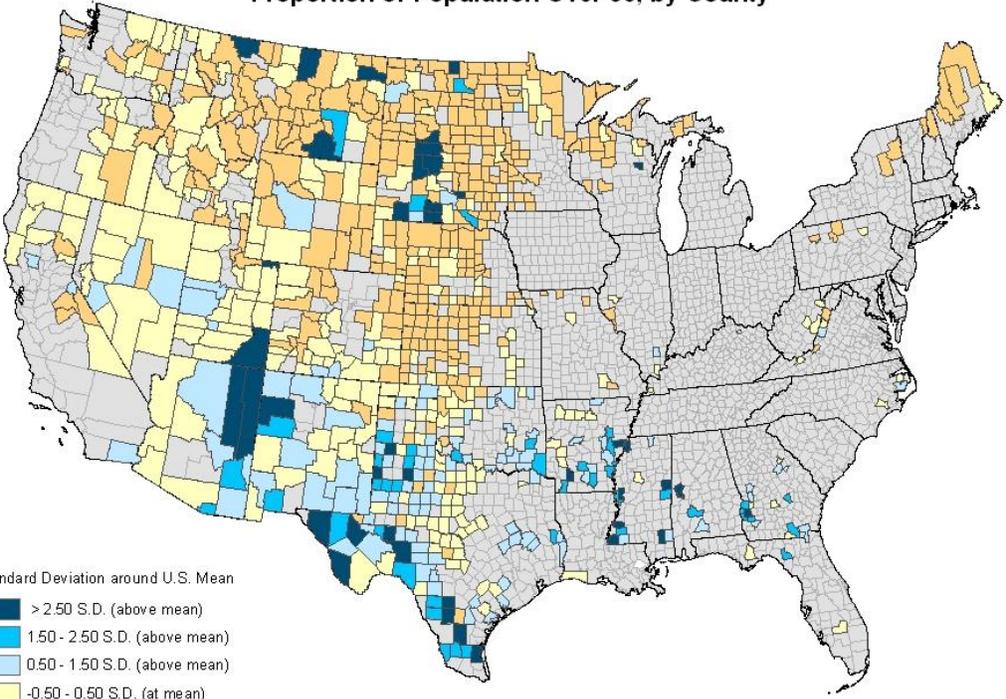
- > 2.50 S.D. (above mean)
- 1.50 - 2.50 S.D. (above mean)
- 0.50 - 1.50 S.D. (above mean)
- 0.50 - 0.50 S.D. (at mean)
- < -0.50 S.D. (below mean)

Data Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Summary File 3, Census 2000  
(50 States and District of Columbia; Puerto Rico data excluded)

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Total Number of GRG: 2,423,608  
GRG as Percent of US Population over 30: 1.5%

**Figure 2: Frontier Grandparents Responsible for Grandchildren, 2000  
Proportion of Population Over 30, by County**



Standard Deviation around U.S. Mean

- > 2.50 S.D. (above mean)
- 1.50 - 2.50 S.D. (above mean)
- 0.50 - 1.50 S.D. (above mean)
- 0.50 - 0.50 S.D. (at mean)
- < -0.50 S.D. (below mean)

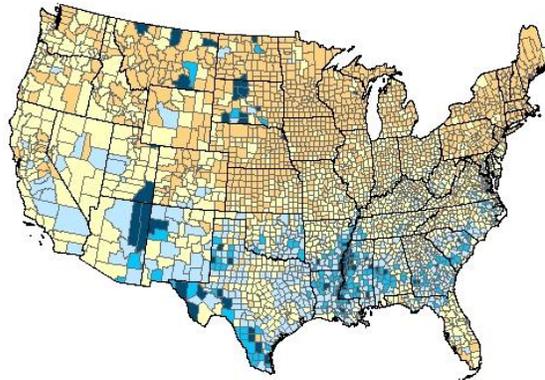
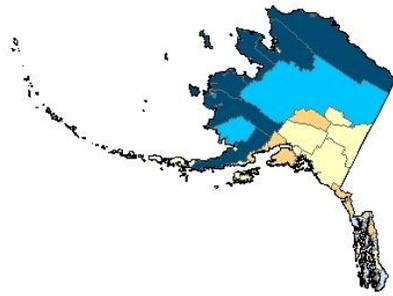
Data Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Summary File 3, Census 2000  
(50 States and District of Columbia; Puerto Rico data excluded)

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Number of Frontier Counties in 2000: 811  
Number of GRG in Frontier Counties: 111,099  
GRG as Percent of U.S. Population over 30: 1.5%  
GRG as Percent of Frontier Population over 30: 1.9%

**Figure 3:  
Grandparents Responsible for Grandchildren  
Proportion of Population Over 30, by County**

*Data Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Summary File 3, Census 2000  
(50 States and District of Columbia; Puerto Rico data excluded)*



Standard Deviation around U.S. Mean

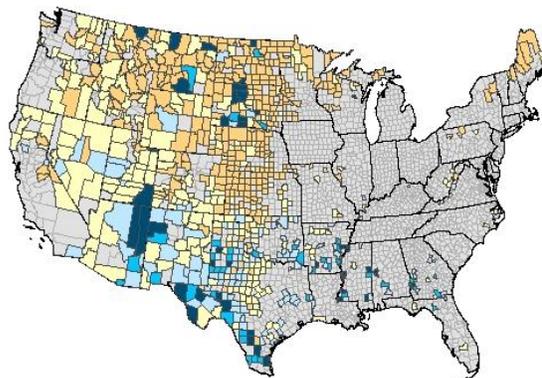
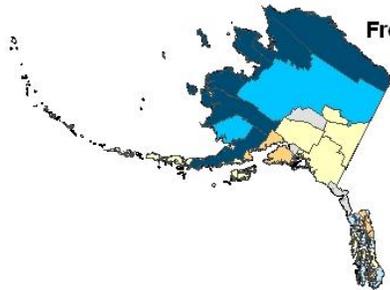
- > 2.50 Std. Dev.
- 1.50 - 2.50 Std. Dev.
- 0.50 - 1.50 Std. Dev.
- 0.50 - 0.50 Std. Dev.
- < -0.50 Std. Dev.

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Total Number of GRG: 2,423,608  
GRG as Percent of US Population over 30: 1.5%

**Figure 4:  
Frontier Grandparents Responsible for Grandchildren  
Proportion of Population Over 30, by County**

*Data Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Summary File 3, Census 2000  
(50 States and District of Columbia; Puerto Rico data excluded)*



Standard Deviation around U.S. Mean

- > 2.50 S.D. (above mean)
- 1.50 - 2.50 S.D. (above mean)
- 0.50 - 1.50 S.D. (above mean)
- 0.50 - 0.50 S.D. (at mean)
- < -0.50 S.D. (below mean)

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Number of Frontier Counties in 2000: 811  
Number of GRG in Frontier Counties: 111,099  
GRG as Percent of U.S. Population: 1.5%  
GRG as Percent of Frontier Population over 30: 1.9%

County-level analysis using data from Census 2000, Summary File 3, confirms a higher proportion of custodial grandparenting in frontier and rural populations than metro populations. Nationally, 1.53 percent of the population over the age of 30 is a Grandparent Responsible for at least one Grandchild (GRG). Using the Census Bureau’s county classification of metro and non-metro counties, 1.50 percent of the over 30 population in metro counties was a GRG, while GRGs represented 1.65 percent of the non-metro population. Further, when non-metro counties are subdivided into micropolitan and non-core counties, 1.60 percent of the micropolitan population was GRG, while 1.72 percent of the non-core population was GRG. Similarly, using the Frontier Education Center’s classification of frontier counties<sup>8,9</sup>, frontier populations had a highest percentage of GRGs – 1.85 percent, compared with 1.52 percent for non-frontier counties.

County Classification	Percent of Population over 30
National	1.53
Metro	1.50
Non-metro	1.65
Micropolitan	1.60
Non-core	1.72
Frontier	1.85
Non-Frontier	1.52

At the county level, the range of GRG reported on the 2000 Census varied greatly, from 0 percent to 12.91 percent. Fifty-three counties had 5 percent or more of its over 30 population counted as a GRG. Of the twenty counties with the highest percentage of GRGs, all were non-metro counties, and 17 were frontier counties.

**Twenty U.S. Counties<sup>+</sup> with Highest Percentage of Grandparents Responsible for Grandchildren**

County	State	Number of GRG	% GRG (over 30 Population)	County Classification
Todd	SD	462	12.91	FR, NM (NC)
Wade Hampton (CA)	AK	263	10.05	FR, NM (NC)
Sioux	ND	157	9.63	FR, NM (NC)
Big Horn	MT	588	9.61	FR, NM (NC)
Shannon	SD	406	9.02	FR, NM (NC)
Sharkey	MS	281	8.61	FR, NM (NC)
Buffalo	SD	70	8.48	FR, NM (NC)
Northwest Arctic	AK	227	8.21	FR, NM (NC)
Dewey	SD	206	7.58	FR, NM (NC)
Sunflower	MS	1060	7.39	NM (MC)
Ziebach County	SD	81	7.35	FR, NM (NC)
Lee	AR	441	7.23	FR, NM (NC)
Bethel (CA)	AK	482	6.96	FR, NM (NC)
Kenedy	TX	16	6.96	FR, NM (MC)
Roosevelt	MT	369	6.90	FR, NM (NC)
Lake and Peninsula	AK	61	6.81	FR, NM (NC)
Apache	AZ	2112	6.65	FR, NM (NC)
Claiborne	MS	349	6.60	NM (NC)
Thurston	NE	229	6.54	NM (NC)
McKinley	NM	2179	6.48	FR, NM (MC)

<sup>+</sup> Counties refers to the 3,141 U.S. Counties, County Equivalents, and Independent Cities as of 2000. FR=Frontier; MT=Metro; MC=Micro; NC=NonCore; NM=Non-Metro (MC+NC)

## Issues Facing Grandparents and Grandchildren

For most grandparents, the responsibility of raising grandchildren comes unexpectedly, and they find themselves unprepared – financially, emotionally, and physically – for the challenges presented, particularly when dealing with tragedy or loss of their own children. Grandparents struggle with legal, financial, housing, health and medical, child care and respite care, and educational issues when suddenly faced with raising young children. A common theme reported by grandparents is stress and coping with change – changes in familial role, residence, schools, lifestyle, finances, and life expectations.

**Legal issues.** Grandparents may need to be legally recognized caregivers to make decisions involving children’s education or medical care, as well as to establish rights regarding visitation of parents or in some cases protection from parents who may attempt to regain custody of their children. Decisions regarding legal custody and guardianship, adoption, or foster parent status may in turn determine eligibility for crucial state or federal assistance programs. Working grandparents usually cannot enroll their grandchildren in health, child care, or other employee benefit programs without legal custody<sup>10</sup>. Grandparents require expert, low-cost legal assistance to determine the best temporary and long-term course of action. As stated by the Idaho Kinship Care Coalition, “there is a great deal of need for affordable legal assistance, mediation services and less red tape”<sup>11</sup>.

**Financial issues.** Many grandparents are retired or living on limited incomes. The expense of raising a grandchild can wipe out retirement savings or further exacerbate already difficult financial situations. Some grandparents are forced to quit working in order to take care of young children, reducing their income. Others who have already retired are forced to begin working again in order to cover the costs of child rearing. Because of their family circumstances, many grandchildren have special health care needs. Grandparents often take on the responsibility of caring for grandchildren out of love and sense of familial duty, preventing many from seeking or accepting outside assistance programs<sup>12</sup>.

Financial issues of raising grandchildren extend beyond the obvious day-to-day costs of caring for children. For example, grandparents who live in subsidized senior housing or housing with restrictions on the number of persons may be forced to move to more costly housing when children are added to the household. And, participation in one assistance program may render them ineligible for another; grandparents need expert assistance to help navigate various programs and determine the best overall options.

### USEFUL WEBSITES

**Grandparenting Today, UW-Extension**

[www.uwex.edu/ces/flp/grandparent](http://www.uwex.edu/ces/flp/grandparent)

**AARP Grandparent Information Center**

[www.aarp.org/life/grandparents/](http://www.aarp.org/life/grandparents/)

**Kinship Care State Fact Sheets**

[research.aarp.org/general/kinship\\_care.html](http://research.aarp.org/general/kinship_care.html)

**Foundation for Grandparenting**

[www.grandparenting.org](http://www.grandparenting.org)

**Generations United**

[www.gu.org](http://www.gu.org)

**Grand Parent Again**

[www.grandparentagain.com](http://www.grandparentagain.com)

**Respite care.** One of the most frequent needs expressed by grandparent caregivers is the need for respite from childcare duties. In rural and frontier areas, however, childcare services are less available. Unless other family members live near by, grandparents may have difficulty finding temporary childcare to take care of their own needs. A major concern is for grandparents who, through financial and time constraints, neglect their own mental and physical health while experiencing high stress levels.

**Isolation.** Grandparents also find themselves more socially isolated and restricted from performing their usual social activities. Grandparents find it difficult to socialize with the other, younger parents, while their own peers can't relate to their new childcare duties. The demands of caring for children – either the very young or school age children – may also prevent them from taking part in their usual social activities, further exacerbating their sense of isolation. Many grandparents report “losing their friends” as a consequence of raising grandchildren. Support groups where grandparents can meet and socialize with other grandparents can help alleviate a sense of being alone.

In rural communities, where isolation is in itself a defining feature of rurality, the issue of isolation may be even greater. Rural grandparents may not come into contact with other GRGs, and they feel like they are the only ones in this situation<sup>13</sup>. Forming a support group in a rural area may require members to travel long distances in order to meet. Access to information and services in general is lower in rural communities compared with urban communities.

**Stigma.** Depending on the circumstances under which grandchildren come into their custody, grandparents and grandchildren may also struggle with shame and stigma. For grandparents, the failure of the grandchildren's parents to care for them may be seen as a failure of the grandparent to raise their own children properly. For the grandchildren, the failures of their parents are conferred on them. Particularly in small communities, the entire family may face prejudices and negative stereotypes about behavior, even from school and social service professionals<sup>14</sup>.

**Generational issues.** Grandparents must also cope with difference in norms and education resulting from the generational gap between themselves and their grandchildren. For example, many grandparents did not complete high school and may not have the education to be able to assist their grandchildren with homework<sup>3</sup>. Thus, as students, grandchildren being raised by grandparents are at a disadvantage with their classmates. Further, grandparents may not feel welcome at school events, as schools often fail to recognize them as the persons responsible for school contacts and permissions<sup>14</sup>.

Ideas about “good parenting” have also changed, yet parenting education is targeted toward first-time parents. Also, children behave differently and have a different set of norms than earlier generations. Grandparents find that they cannot raise their grandchildren the same way they raised their own children, yet they lack guidance on these changes. Some grandparents fear what they perceive as higher levels of aggression among today's children<sup>15</sup>. Finally, given age and health concerns, many grandparents fear not being physically able to provide a “normal” family life for grandchildren, for example, being able to participate in sports or other activities

like the parents of other children. The ultimate fear is that they will not survive long enough to be able to guide the child into adulthood.

**Helping grandchildren cope.** Grandchildren themselves face a number of issues when coming to live with grandparents. First, these children must deal with the loss of a parent and a disruption in the home environment. Many experience grief, anger and depression from these disruptions and may need counseling to help make the adjustment. Second, many come from environments of abuse or neglect and may experience long-term mental and physical health problems requiring treatment. Higher rates of ADD, learning, and behavioral disorders have been reported for children in kinship care<sup>14</sup>. Socially, many children may experience discomfort or alienation from their peers for not having a “normal” family. Grandchildren may also struggle academically, and benefit from tutoring or other forms of academic assistance. School programs that raise awareness of teachers and school staff and assist grandparents and grandchildren with their needs may be important for both academic and social success.

### **Research on Grandparents Raising Grandchildren in Rural and Frontier Communities**

As a relatively new area of concern, research on grandparents raising grandchildren is limited. From a population perspective, more research is needed on specific groups and subgroups. Because most grandparenting research focuses on grandmothers, who are the majority of grandparent caregivers, the role of grandfathers as both primary and secondary caregivers has been neglected. And, because of their high rates of grandparenting, further research on Native American populations is needed.

From a place-based perspective, little is known about custodial grandparenting in frontier and rural contexts. Strategies to assist grandparents in urban areas are unlikely to meet the needs of rural grandparents. For example, in a study of grandmothers who were raising grandchildren in rural North Carolina, researchers reported that most were unaware of existing support groups and other services available to them. Among those who were aware, none had sought out the available support and assistance<sup>15</sup>.

A study conducted by the Center for Rural Health at the University of North Dakota compared caregiving among American Indians in five reservation populations with the rest of the state population to identify support needs, patterns of service use, and assess barriers to support services<sup>12</sup>. Overall, higher rates of grandparenting, as well as a higher average number of children being cared for by a grandparent, were observed for the reservation populations than for the rest of the state. Among both populations, a majority (60%) reported no source of

#### **Cooperative Extension Services**

Many rural residents may be familiar with land grant university extension and outreach services, but associate these services primarily with agricultural assistance or 4-H youth programs. In some states, Extension Services also offer family programs and are developing programs for grandparents raising grandchildren. University of Wisconsin-Extension hosted two national satellite conferences on grandparents raising grandchildren, and has created a website as a resource for grandparents and professionals<sup>16,17</sup>.

A state-by-state compilation of Cooperative Extension resources on Grandparenting and Kinship Care is available from the UW-Extension website, *Grandparenting Today*<sup>18</sup>.

<http://www.uwex.edu/ces/flp/grandparent>

financial support to the child. More reservation grandparents held full-time employment (40%) compared with the statewide population (26%), yet the percentage of grandparents with incomes below \$20,000 was higher among reservation residents (57%) than statewide residents (38%). Less than half of the reservation grandparents reported other caregivers in the household (45%) compared with the general population (67%). Similarly, fewer reservation grandparents reported support from family outside the household (32%) than the general population (43%). With the exception of medical assistance, reservation respondents reported less access to child services such as counseling, tutoring, and special education. For both groups, however, the two issues of greatest concern were difficulty accepting support and difficulty finding support.

One study is underway at Montana State University-Bozeman (MSU) to examine grandparenting in isolated rural communities. Sandra Bailey of the Department of Health and Human Development and MSU-Extension Family & Human Development Specialist is researching parenting role stress on grandparents and how it affects wellbeing. Another objective of the research is to determine to what extent support groups reach grandparents in Montana's frontier communities, and how well these groups meet the needs of frontier grandparents.

For grandparents who need information on legal, health, counseling, educational, and childcare services, as well as assistance in navigating federal and state assistance programs, simply getting information is the first hurdle. Ideally, grandparents would be able to seek advice tailored to their situation and needs, all within a single assistance center<sup>15</sup>. Studies repeatedly show that most grandparents do not take advantage of existing services and support programs. More research is needed to find effective information channels to reach rural and frontier grandparents, to understand their fears and obstacles to using available services, and to design services that are accessible and acceptable.

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