

The Complexities of Kinship Care: Key Findings from the 2013 National Survey of Children in Nonparental Care

By definition, children in non-parental care lack a consistent relationship with parents, who typically are a primary force in children's healthy development and social functioning. The 2013 National Survey of Children in Nonparental Care (NSCNC) was the first large-scale, population based, nationally representative survey on the 3.1% of all U.S. children who live with neither of their parents. Most of these children lived with grandparents (63.1%). Another 22.3% lived with other relatives or family friends and 14.7% lived with foster parents, some of whom were also relatives.

Children in non-parental care are vulnerable across multiple dimensions: Children in nonparental care in 2013 were disproportionately minority (more than one-third of children in nonparental care are non-Hispanic Black) and poor (just over one-third lived in poor households and another third lived in low income households). They are in poorer health (they were nearly twice as likely to have any of 10 common current mental health conditions and any of 8 common current physical health conditions) and do worse in school (more than twice as likely to have repeated a grade).

The reasons for parents' absence are complicated. The NSCNC asked questions about why parents did not live with their children. Response categories were developed from existing research literature and the experience of social workers who interact with families regularly. Yet with respect to nearly one-third of mothers and over half of fathers, caregivers named something "other" than the categories provided as an important reason for parental absence.

The child welfare system plays a behind-the-scenes role in many informal kinship care situations. While kinship foster care has been studied relatively widely, this study provides new insight into ways child welfare agencies are involved with children who live with relatives and other nonparental caregivers outside the foster care system. Background checks, home visits, and past open CPS cases were part of the process through which 20 to 25% of children *not* in foster care entered nonparental care, and courts had bestowed responsibility for the child's care on just over half of kinship care providers who were not also foster parents (though not necessarily through abuse/neglect proceedings). The role of the child welfare system in kinship care situations where children are not in foster care remains poorly understood.

Parents play continuing roles in the lives of children living with other caregivers. Parents continue to be important to children's social, emotional, and, sometimes, economic well-being even if they do not live with their children. This survey shows that most parents visit with their children not living with them, at least sporadically and often more frequently. Contact is more frequent for children not in foster care and is more frequent for mothers than fathers.

Caregiving expectations and legal status may not match. Many nonparental caregivers who say they expect to continue caring for the child in their household "until they're grown" lack legal custody or guardianship status. This situation may create eligibility barriers for services or benefits and may leave children without legal protection if the circumstances of the current caregiver change or if a parent who presents risk to a child decides to reassert authority. Many caregivers may not understand the importance of legal status and may be unfamiliar with the processes involved in establishing custody.

The full analysis prepared by the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation may be found at: <https://aspe.hhs.gov/pdf-report/children-living-apart-their-parents-highlights-national-survey-children-nonparental-care>