

Many Grandparents Raising Children's Children

Yanyi K. Djamba

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Throughout human history, grandparents have played a key role in raising their grandchildren, but mostly while the parents of the children themselves supplied necessary needs for child-raising.

Today, nearly one in four grandparents in Alabama and about one in 10 grandparents in the United States are raising at least one of their own grandchildren under age 18, according to the preliminary findings from the "State of Marriage in Alabama," a study currently being conducted by the Center for Demographic Research at Auburn University Montgomery.

Who are these grandparents? Where are the actual parents?

The "State of Marriage in Alabama" project will answer these questions and provide more detailed information about the changing patterns of marriage, family and living arrangements. The study results will be released this summer, but here are some interesting statistics to give you an idea of the extent of the issue.

About 4 percent of all households in Alabama and the United States have grandparents living with grandchildren. When it comes to actual child-raising, Alabama grandparents bear a disproportionate burden. Fifty-seven percent of Alabamian grandparents living with their own grandchildren are actually responsible for these grandchildren, compared to 41 percent of grandparents in the United States.

In some counties (Clarke, DeKalb, Escambia, Etowah, Macon and Marengo) more than 70 percent of grandparents are primarily responsible for their grandchildren. These same counties also have high birth rates and high poverty rates.

In addition, in Alabama about 44 percent of grandparents responsible for their grandchildren do so in the absence of the actual parents, compared to 35 percent of American grandparents. Where are the parents? In many cases, the parents are incarcerated, dead, have serious substance abuse problems, or are present but economically or mentally incapable of taking care of their own children.

What about custodian grandparents? Fifty-seven percent of custodian grandparents in Alabama and 67 percent of custodian grandparents in the United States are 30-59 years old, an age group in which most people are still in the labor force. For example, 68 percent of Alabamian grandparents aged 30-59 are working. The comparable figure for the United States is 61 percent.

Since most of the grandchildren are young (four in 10 are below age 6), child-raising presents many challenges for both the custodian grandparents and their grandchildren. Moreover, most of these custodian grandparents are female (65 percent in Alabama and 63 percent in the United States) with low incomes.

Compared to children living with their own parents, those under grandparents' care are more likely to be living in poverty. Grandparents who raise grandchildren face many challenges. Some grandparents experience ambivalent feelings about the situation in which they have been placed. They are concerned about the welfare of their own children (the actual parent) as well as the welfare of their grandchildren.

In some cases, great-grandparents are present, creating an even more complex situation. In these intergenerational households, who to care for and how much time to devote to each generation becomes an everyday challenge.

There are other issues of concern -- legal, social and emotional. For example, in the case of parental substance abuse, grandchildren may be frightened of being forced to return to their parents who are not yet fully recovered from addiction or who the children perceive to still be suffering addiction.

What kind of assistance do these grandchildren need? Who should assist them? Who can assist the grandparents as they navigate the legal systems? What happens when the caregiver grandparent (or great-grandparent) passes away, gets sick, or becomes unemployed?

Besides these extreme circumstances, many grandparents who take care of their grandchildren end up resenting their children for thrusting the responsibility upon them. Still, many grandparents are willing to do all they can to ensure that their grandchildren are raised in a manner to encourage a better life and avoid the cycle of intergenerational child-raising.

Given the magnitude of the issue, states and the federal government as well as non-governmental agencies have put together several resources to help grandparents who become guardians of their grandchildren. So, if you are raising a grandchild, resources and local support groups are available to help you do the best job possible.

In Alabama, the Alabama Department of Senior Services, the Alabama Department of Human Resources, various offices of the Alabama Cooperative Extension System, area agencies on aging, the Family Guidance Center of Alabama, the Alabama Community Healthy Marriage Initiative, and other agencies offer important information that can help grandparents understand their role and rights and to learn more about becoming better caregivers and better guardians of their grandchildren.

The Center for Demographic Research's forthcoming book, "State of Marriage in Alabama," will present the changing patterns of marriage, family, and household in Alabama in comparison to the United States and increase awareness of the new role that grandparents are playing in the lives of their grandchildren.

Yanyi K. Djamba is director of the Center for Demographic Research and associate professor of sociology at Auburn University Montgomery. The center's Web site is www.demographics.aum.edu.