



Kinship Foster Care: Custody, Hardships, and Services

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An abused or neglected child enters kinship foster care when a child welfare agency places the child with a relative and a court makes that relative responsible for the child's care. Data from the National Survey of America's Families (NSAF) indicate that 405,000 children lived in kinship foster care in 2002.¹ While kinship foster care offers children family support, the relatives they live with are frequently poor and face hardships themselves, and children in kinship foster care often do not receive important protections and services.

How Many Children Are in Kinship Foster Care?

In contrast to the 2002 NSAF estimate of 405,000 children in kinship foster care, the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS), the federal system for collecting data from states on the number of children in foster care, estimates that approximately 131,000 children lived in kinship foster care in September 2001. The federal estimate counts only those children who are also in the custody of the state, while the NSAF estimate includes all children for whom a court has made a relative responsible (figure 1).²

In many states, the child welfare agency may, under certain circumstances, help arrange for a relative to care for a child without involving the court. Relatives may agree to care for children before a court becomes involved to avoid further entanglement with the child welfare system or having custody of the child taken from the parent. When these children are included, the NSAF estimate of the kinship foster care population rises to 542,000 children in 2002.

Hardships and Services

Children in kinship foster care face substantial hardships—even greater than the hardships of children in foster care with nonrelatives. Children in court-involved kinship foster care are more than

twice as likely as children living with non-kin foster parents to live in families with incomes below 200 percent of the federal poverty thresholds (50.2 percent versus 23.8 percent, as shown in figure 2). They are also more than twice as likely to live with a single caregiver (55.1 percent versus 27.3 percent). Differences in the shares of children who live with older or less-educated caregivers are not statistically significant.

Child welfare policies and services are generally directed to children in state custody. Yet, as the difference between the NSAF and AFCARS estimates show, most children in kinship foster care are not in state custody. Only children in state custody are eligible for federal-reimbursed foster care payments. Moreover, child welfare agencies

only have to oversee cases of children in state custody. For example, in cases where the court is involved but the state does not take custody, the kin caregiver is not required to become a licensed foster parent. This situation could jeopardize the child's safety if living conditions are not assessed carefully. Similarly, children who are not in state custody typically do not receive permanency planning services to help reunite them with their parents or find them an adoptive home. Finally, children placed by the child welfare agency without court involvement often are not monitored as frequently, which could also jeopardize their safety.

DATA AT A GLANCE

405,000 CHILDREN LIVED IN
COURT-INVOLVED KINSHIP FOSTER
CARE IN 2002.

50 PERCENT OF CHILDREN IN KINSHIP
FOSTER CARE LIVE IN LOW-INCOME
HOUSEHOLDS COMPARED WITH 24
PERCENT OF CHILDREN LIVING WITH
NON-KIN FOSTER PARENTS.

Discussion

Many abused and neglected children today are placed with relatives rather than in traditional non-kin foster homes. Experts believe there are substantial benefits to placing children separated from their parents with relatives rather than with unrelated foster parents. Relatives can provide family support and frequent contact with birth parents and siblings (Chipungu et al. 1998; Dubowitz et al. 1994). In fact, relatives are the preferred placement option of child welfare agencies, and placements with relatives have become more common than non-kin foster placements in many states.

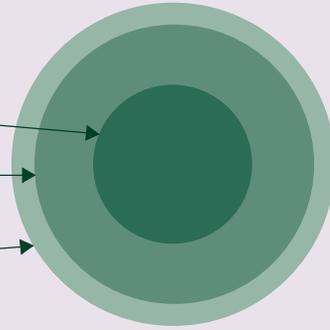


Figure 1. Abused and Neglected Children Living with Relatives

131,000 in state custody
(2001 AFCARS)

405,000 involved with courts
(2002 NSAF)

542,000 involved with social services
(2002 NSAF)



Sources: 2002 National Survey of America's Families (NSAF) and September 2001 data from the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS)

or herself as a foster parent. Since 1997, states have made substantial changes in how they use relatives as caregivers and whether they license kin as foster parents. The 2002 NSAF definition of kinship foster care, adopted in response to those changes, specified court involvement in the placement rather than relatives' identification of themselves as foster parents. The 1999 NSAF did not ask relative caregivers about court involvement or whether they identified themselves as foster parents, so a kinship foster care population was not identified in that survey year.

² AFCARS may not account for all children in state custody living with kin because of differences in states' definitions. The 131,000 may be an undercount. A more accurate estimate might be closer to the 1997 NSAF estimate of 195,000 children with relative caregivers who identified themselves as foster parents.

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Kinship foster families, however, often face hardships that can make caring for abused or neglected children difficult. Fewer than half the children in kinship foster care are in state custody, to which receipt of foster care payments and further monitoring by the child welfare agency are generally tied. Many children in kinship foster care, therefore, may not be receiving the services needed to ensure the safety of their placements.

References

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- Dubowitz, Howard, Susan Feigelman, Donna Harrington, Raymond Starr, Susan Zuravin, and Richard Sawyer. 1994. "Children in Kinship Care: How Do They Fare?" *Children and Youth Services Review* 16(1-2): 85-106.

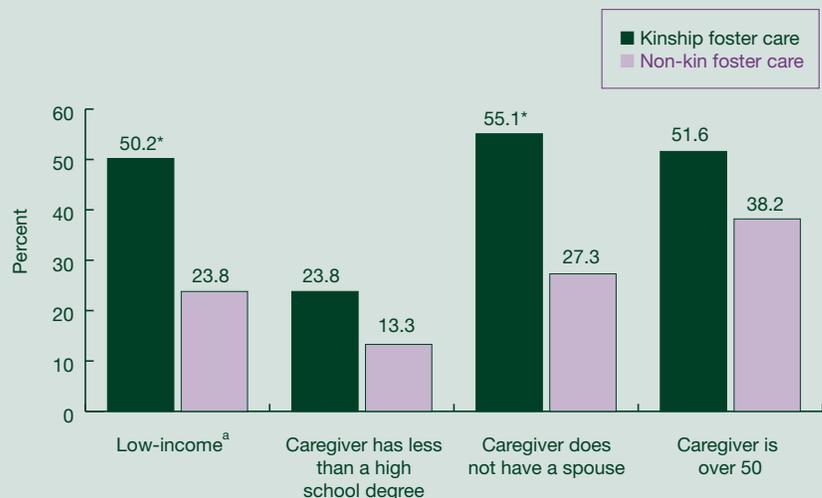
Acknowledgments

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Endnotes

- ¹ The 1997 NSAF estimated that 195,000 children were in kinship foster care; the definition in that survey included children for whom a relative identified himself

Figure 2. Demographic Hardships Faced by Children in Kinship and Non-Kin Foster Care



Source: 2002 National Survey of America's Families

^a Low-income is defined as below 200 percent of the federal poverty thresholds.

* Difference between children in kinship foster care and children in non-kin foster care is significant at the 0.10 level.

SNAPSHOTS
of America's Families



Snapshots III presents findings from the 1997, 1999, and 2002 rounds of the National Survey of America's Families (NSAF). Information on more than 100,000 people was gathered from approximately 40,000 representative households in each round. The NSAF is part of the *Assessing the New Federalism* project (ANF). Information on ANF and the NSAF can be obtained at <http://www.urban.org/anf>.

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