



JUNE 2026

Grandparent child care in the U.S.: What we know, what's missing, and what policy can do

By Emily Franchett

For many families in the United States, having grandparents provide child care is not just occasional help. It's what makes work and parenting possible. Yet despite their central role in supporting families, too often grandparents are overlooked or taken for granted in the design of child care systems and policies. This post focuses on one particularly common group of grandparents: non-custodial or non-guardian grandparents who provide regular child care while the child's parents remain the legal guardians and primary caregivers. By understanding the motivations, experiences, strengths, and needs of these grandparent-caregivers, alongside the policies and programs that may shape their day-to-day lives, we can help ensure that grandparents and their families have access to the supports they want and need.

Grandparents are foundational to child care for many families in the United States.

According to nationally representative data from the Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP), in 2023 nearly half of children under 5 (47%, or approximately 8,713,000) and over a third of children ages 5-10 (37%, or approximately 9,040,000) received some form of child care from grandparents.[1] Research suggests that grandparent care for young children plays an important role among families who work nonstandard hours (evenings, weekends, overnight) [2] and among single parents and working mothers more broadly,[3] who may turn to grandparents when juggling family and work. Routine grandparent care is also common in multigenerational households where grandparents co-reside with grandchildren and their parent(s),[2] a living arrangement that is particularly common among Black, Asian, and Latine families.[4] Other research indicates that grandparents are a critical source of care for families of children with disabilities as well.[5]

Grandparent child care takes many forms.

Grandparent caregiving arrangements can look very different depending on families' preferences and needs. Much of the policy and research on grandparents and child care to-date has centered on guardian and custodial grandparents— those who are raising their grandchildren as the legal guardians and primary caregivers.[6,7] These grandparent-caregivers face significant challenges and deserve and require attention and support, but they are only one part of the broader landscape of grandparent child care. Many more grandparents provide routine care for grandchildren while parents remain the primary caregivers.

Within non-guardian and non-custodial grandparent care, there are different types and intensities.[2] Grandparents may provide daily care while parents work, cover early mornings, evenings, and overnight shifts, care for grandchildren during school breaks, or provide back-up care when children are sick. In some cases, care is part-time and sporadic. In other cases, grandparents may provide 30 or more hours of care each week, functioning in many ways as the family's primary child care provider, but without the recognition or supports that legal guardians or formal providers receive.[2,8,9] Because grandparent child care arrangements tend to be informal and family-based, they often remain invisible in official child care statistics and policy discussions.[10,11] When these grandparents are included, they're often grouped along with other relative or family, friend, and neighbor (FFN) care more broadly, as seen in national surveys and administrative child care systems, which can obscure the distinct family relationships and unique caregiving roles that grandparents bring.



Grandparents have different motivations for entering child care, and supports should reflect that diversity.

Grandparents' reasons for entering into child care arrangements are varied and typically multifaceted. These motives may reflect a combination of cultural values, economic circumstances, system and structural realities, and relationship dynamics, to name a few. Research and practice suggest that the motivations for initiating grandparent child care are shared across the family system, with grandparents and parents often opting into child care arrangements for reasons that may at times be overlapping and in other ways distinct.[8,9]

For many families, grandparent child care is not just a second-best alternative to formal care. It is a preferred and culturally resonant form of child care, rooted in trust-based relationships and family interdependence. Grandparents may view child care as a deeply held family responsibility or priority that supports cultural and

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language transmission, family cohesion, and a sense of continuity across generations. Parents, similarly, prefer grandparent care because it reflects and enforces these values. Grandparents and parents alike may feel reassured that children are in safe and trusted hands.[8,12]

At the same time, for families facing economic hardship, grandparent care can make the difference between stable employment for parents and not working at all. Grandparent caregiving is strongly associated with maternal employment in the U.S.[13] Families may turn to grandparents for child care support given the realities of long or unpredictable work schedules, limited employer benefits, lack of paid leave time, and high costs of living and child care. In these cases, grandparents may step in primarily to help their adult children remain employed, pursue education, or manage the financial strain of child care and other costs. [8,9,14]



Emotional connection and personal meaning can be another motivation. Many grandparents describe caregiving for children as a source of joy, purpose, and closeness with their grandchildren that brings meaning to their lives. For grandparents living alone or recently retired, child care can provide structure and social connection. Spending time with grandchildren can be a principal motivation to opt into child care.[8,9,14]

Some grandparents have described obligation and family pressure as factors. In these cases, grandparent child care arrangements arise out of family expectations or a sense of duty. Research has found that when caregiving is motivated primarily out of constraint or obligation, it can be associated with worse well-being for grandparents.[15] But these sentiments can be complicated. A feeling of obligation may be intertwined with motivations or need to support parents economically or to prevent grandchildren from entering caregiving arrangements that might be considered less desirable.[16]

This list isn't exhaustive. Every family is different. These motivational differences matter for how supports should be designed. Grandparents providing care primarily out of duty and obligation may benefit from supports that attend to the complexity of family relationships

and that account for the needs of the whole family unit. These might include communication resources, relationship mediation, or wraparound supports for family members. Structural relief, such as financial assistance, access to desirable backup care options, and flexible parental work schedules, may be just as meaningful as relational supports by reducing the pressures that impose a sense of obligation in the first place. For grandparents whose primary motive is emotional connection, professionally framed supports centered on licensing, credentials, or financial compensation may feel less relevant or even unwelcome. On the other hand, some grandparents may express interest in financial supports, for example, if they have exited the workforce early or are incurring costs.[3,17] Others may value peer connection, shared learning, and finding meaning in community spaces where grandparent-caregivers can exchange experiences and access information.[18] And some grandparents may already be operating at the intersection of informal and formal care, or be interested in moving in that direction, for example, by caring for grandchildren alongside other children or pursuing licensure. For this group, professional development pathways, peer and professional networks, and compensation structures can be meaningful resources.

In summary, across the millions of grandparent-caregivers, needs and preferences vary widely according to their underlying motivations for care. Supports that feel empowering to one grandparent may feel burdensome or irrelevant to another, and so designing grandparent-caregiver supports requires nuance and flexibility. The goal of policy should not be to impose one model of caregiving, but to ensure that grandparents who provide regular child care can access the supports they want and need based on their unique circumstances.

Research shows both benefits and challenges of child care for grandparent-caregivers.

Research from the U.S. and internationally has identified several benefits associated with grandparent caregiving, including a sense of purpose, reduced loneliness and depression, feelings of joy and fulfillment, and a strong relationship with their grandchild.[3,8,19] Although caregiving can be rewarding, it often comes with financial, physical, and emotional pressures. Grandparents providing regular care can experience opportunity costs, such as foregoing work and income, financial expenses related to food, transportation, and supplies, physical demands of caring for young children, and at times, family tensions related to parenting decisions and philosophies.[3,7,8,15]

The benefits and challenges experienced by grandparents can also vary by the type of grandparent caregiving arrangement.[7,19,20] Studies have found the strongest benefits to health and well-being among non-custodial and non-guardian grandparents who live in their own homes (compared to those who co-reside with grandchildren or hold legal custody),[7,21] although family life stress and relationship strain



can undercut these benefits for any grandparent.[19,20] A recent study from England also found that the reasons that grandparents take on child care matter. Caregiving that was primarily motivated by a sense of obligation or inability to refuse was associated with worse well-being, while motivations that were rooted in connection to young people and supporting grandchildren's development were associated with more positive outcomes.[15]

Additionally, material conditions of caregiving also shape grandparents' experiences. Many grandparents provide extensive child care without pay and with limited access to formal support systems. This gap is particularly pronounced in the U.S., where federal and employer supports for working families remain limited. [3,7,8] For some, caregiving responsibilities reshape retirement plans, employment decisions, and personal health care choices. [3,15] The negative impacts of caregiving are also not evenly distributed: Grandparents with fewer financial resources, poorer health, or less family support are more likely to experience adverse effects.[3] For these reasons, making sure grandparent-caregivers can access the resources and services they need, whether it's financial, material, emotional, social, or practical, matters for grandparents, parents, and children alike.[7,8]

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Policies, programs, and supports that shape grandparents' caregiving experiences operate at multiple levels.

In the U.S., policies and programs can operate and interact at multiple levels to influence grandparents' child caregiving experiences. This ranges from federal legislation, to state regulations, to county administration, to community programs, to family and individual characteristics. Grandparent caregiving is rarely shaped by just one single factor, which is why a multilevel view matters. Table 1 presents examples of these influences across levels.

While both publicly funded government systems and community-based supports may operate in tandem, insights from practice reveal that these can often be quite siloed. Caregivers might have access to one but not the other, or may be unaware that either exists. Locally rooted supports frequently serve as critical bridges when formal systems are inaccessible or unavailable. Since grandparents and other FFN caregivers come from such diverse backgrounds, local organizations run by and for specific cultural communities can play a critical role in informing and connecting caregivers to the range of supports available to them. Fostering and investing in these locally rooted support systems over the long term, alongside federal and state policy and programs, is essential for holistic and comprehensive support for grandparents and their families.



Table 1. Levels of Policy, Programs and Supports Shaping Grandparent Caregiving

INDIVIDUAL 	Grandparent age, marital status, and health; grandparent motivation for child care; child's age, needs, and temperament; grandparent's employment and financial situation
FAMILY 	Caregiving arrangements and negotiated roles; family economic resources; cultural values; language; parent-grandparent communication and boundaries; presence of other caregivers; family relationships
COMMUNITY 	Community-based organizations; FFN caregiver networks and peer support groups; home visiting programs; faith communities; immigrant-serving organizations; food banks and material supports; playgroups
COUNTY / LOCAL 	Child care resource and referral agencies; county health and human services; local child care licensing offices; county-level subsidy administration
STATE 	Child care subsidy eligibility rules; licensing requirements; relative caregiver policies (e.g., relationship to children, number of children in care, co-residence restrictions); payment rates; Friend, Family, and Neighbor and Kin care support initiatives
FEDERAL 	Child Care and Development Block Grant funding; eligibility for SNAP, Medicaid, Social Security, Supplemental Security Income (SSI); immigration enforcement policies; Head Start eligibility

The policy landscape for grandparent-caregivers varies considerably across states.

An important lever and source of variation nationally that may influence U.S. grandparents' caregiving experiences is state policy. State policy can shape whether grandparents who provide regular child care are able to access formal supports or remain largely outside the child care system. State policies affecting grandparent-caregivers are continually evolving as states balance goals around child safety, workforce development, and family support, and the policies governing child care subsidies, licensing rules, and family caregiver supports vary widely across states.[22]

Several policy factors are particularly important. On the eligibility side, these include whether relatives can receive child care subsidies without becoming licensed providers, whether grandparents who live with their grandchildren qualify for support, and whether care can take place in the child's home. On the practical side, factors such as administrative requirements, limits on how many children a caregiver can serve, and whether payment rates are adequate and make participation financially feasible can all shape whether grandparent-caregivers are recognized and supported in practice. In many states, community-based organizations play a crucial role in filling gaps when formal policy pathways are limited.[22]

Examples from Colorado, Pennsylvania, and North Carolina illustrate how these policy choices play out differently across states, and what these might mean for grandparents providing regular child care, which is summarized in Table 2. These three states illustrate how state policy design might expand or limit the ways grandparents who provide regular child care connect with formal support systems. Policies can influence whether grandparents can receive financial compensation for care, whether they can access training or professional support, and whether caregiving remains entirely informal and under supported. Even when policies technically allow participation, administrative requirements, payment levels, and awareness barriers can still limit access. Understanding these policy environments is critical for designing systems that better reflect the ways families actually organize child care.

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Table 2. Child Care Policy Dimensions for Non-Guardian Grandparent Care: State Examples

Policy Dimension	North Carolina 	Pennsylvania 	Colorado 
			
Subsidy eligibility without full licensure	Subsidy requires full licensure; informal/license-exempt grandparents largely outside formal system	Relative caregivers may be eligible through Child Care Works; grandparents may care for up to 5 relative children, but no non-relative children; some administrative hurdles apply	Grandparents can qualify as “qualified exempt” providers under Colorado Child Care Assistance Program (CCCAP); subsidy available without full licensing; may care for up to 4 children
Co-residence eligibility	Primarily structured around licensed, non-relative settings; co-residing grandparents face significant access barriers	Relatives generally cannot live in the same household as the child to receive subsidy; excludes many multigenerational families	Flexible; care can occur in grandparent’s or child’s home; paid relatives can live in the same household as the child
Payment rates and financial feasibility	Requirements that grandparents become licensed to access subsidy create barriers that many informal caregivers cannot or do not navigate	Payment rates for relative caregivers are relatively low, limiting financial incentive to participate formally	Subsidy rates for exempt providers have improved in recent years; ongoing efforts to raise reimbursement across provider types; rates are set by county governments resulting in variability within the state
Training and support programs	Community-based organizations (CBOs; e.g., Smart Start, FFN networks) fill major gaps; state-level FFN support infrastructure is limited	Early Learning Resource Centers (ELRC) offer some training and support to family caregivers; expanding but uneven across the state	State-funded family, friend, and neighbor (FFN) initiatives provide training, peer connections, and resource access
Role of community-based organizations	CBOs are the primary infrastructure for grandparent-caregiver support in many areas; often operating independently from formal state systems	CBOs and ELRC offices serve as navigators for families; key for immigrant and multilingual communities	CBOs complement state supports; FFN caregiver networks help connect grandparents to both formal subsidies and peer communities

Other factors can also shape grandparent caregiving.

While state policy is a critical lever, it's also only one part of the picture. As mentioned, community-based, locally rooted supports are another resource. Other factors shaping grandparent caregiving experiences include family dynamics, cultural norms around intergenerational support, local community networks, availability of playgroups and peer support, and socioeconomic conditions.[3] Policies that strengthen safety nets and expand access to social services for parents and children can also shape how grandparents perceive their caregiving role and the degree to which they engage in it.[3,8] Additionally, broader policy changes, such as shifts in Medicaid, SNAP, or immigration policy, may affect grandparents' willingness or ability to access public services and benefits. This can have ripple effects on their economic stability, well-being, and capacity to provide care. Examining how these different influences operate and interact at multiple levels can help us better understand the complex realities of grandparent caregiving and inform responsive supports.

The way forward:

Grandparents are already a core part of the U.S. child care infrastructure. The question is whether the systems designed to support families recognize them. Building child care systems and supports that are responsive to the way families actually live and choose care requires updating policies based on existing evidence, incorporating grandparent voice and experience, and accounting for the full range of grandparent caregiving motivations and arrangements.



Endnotes

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