

Characteristics of Grandparents Residing with Dependent Grandchildren in West Virginia and Four Comparison States that Partially Overlap Northern Appalachia

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Abstract

The growing numbers of grandparents raising grandchildren have continued to attract attention among scholars. Studies may obscure the fact that while many grandparents may reside with grandchildren, they are not necessarily the primary caretakers or financial providers. The major purpose of the study is to provide a more comprehensive overview of the segments of the population in West Virginia and other states that overlap Northern Appalachia that are actually responsible for the basic needs of their grandchildren with whom they reside. Age, race, and gender distributions of caregivers by state are reviewed. Findings indicate that grandparent caregivers in West Virginia may be especially vulnerable due to higher poverty rates, despite their greater likelihood of having two-grandparent households. The results highlight the often overlooked roles of younger grandparents and grandfathers. Policy and practice recommendations are presented to better address the needs of grandparent households.

Keywords: Grandparents, raising grandchildren, caretakers, Appalachia, poverty, child welfare

I. Introduction

For the past decade, researchers, service providers, and policy makers alike have focused increasingly on the growing numbers of grandchildren under the age of eighteen and grandparents who are residing together, with the grandparent having primary responsibility for their basic needs (Bullock, 2004; Burnette, 1997; Ruiz and Carlton-LaNey, 1999; Kropf and Kolomer, 2004; Smith, Beltran, Butts, and Kingston, 2000; Waldrop, 2003). It is estimated that 6.3 percent of grandchildren who are minors reside in grandparent-headed households. Census data indicates that between 1990 and 2000, the estimated number of grandchildren living in such households increased by 29.7 percent to over 4.5 million grandchildren (Mader, 2006). Coresident grandchildren or grandchildren who reside with their grandparents have become a topic of interest to professionals and laypersons as well. This heightened interest has led to the first-time inclusion of direct questions pertaining to grandparents in the 2000 decennial census long form questionnaire.

Researchers have continued to grapple with questions pertaining to the profiles of grandparent providers who reside with their grandchildren. A few studies have looked at grandparents from a single racial or ethnic group. Some compare several groups, while many others tend to examine them in aggregate (Bullock, 2004; Burnette, 2000; Fuller-Thomson and Minkler, 2005; Jendrek, 1994; Kolomer, McCallion, and Janicki, 2002; Ruiz & Carlton-LaNey, 1999; Smith, Beltran, Butts, and Kingston, 2000; Waldrop, 2003). Studies indicate that the majority of grandparents providing for grandchildren are female (Waldrop, 2003). Hence, very few researchers have focused on the role played by grandfathers (Bullock, 2005).

Getting a firm handle on the caregiver and provider roles played by grandparents, as a whole, is not an easy task. Researchers generally overlook the important roles played by non-custodial and nonresident grandparents who frequently provide significant and sometimes extended childcare services and informal financial support to grandchildren. Scholars who rely on census and other secondary datasets are limited by the questionnaires and available tabulations which are generally not designed to delve into the informal roles played by non-household members. Hence, scholars conducting large-scale studies tend to focus primarily on grandparent providers who reside with their grandchildren. Scholars often label the latter situation as “grandparents raising grandchildren.”

Distinctions, however, must be made between a coresident grandparent who provides financial support for a grandchild's basic needs (i.e., food, clothing, and shelter) while a coresident parent is actually responsible for the daily childcare, versus custodial grandparents who do both, versus those who share these responsibilities with the parent. On the other hand, you also have some coresident grandparents who are not providing financially for the majority of a grandchild's basic needs, but may be helping with the bulk of childcare and training. Unfortunately, the census questionnaire was not designed to sort out these differences. Hence, census tabulations can only address whether or not coresident grandparents are responsible for most of the basic needs of their grandchildren.

One must be careful not to equate "residing with," "raising," or "responsible for most of their basic needs" as being the same. The decennial census 2000 data indicates that 58 percent of grandparents who reside with grandchildren are not responsible for most of their basic needs. In situations where the grandparents reside in the homes of the grandchildren's parents (who are the designated householders owning or renting the residence), only 8.7 percent claim responsibility for meeting most of the grandchildren's basic needs (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2000a). It is clear in the census long form questionnaire (question 19, part c) that "responsible for most of the basic needs" refers to financial responsibility (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2000d). However, in cases where the parent is absent (which the data tabulations don't indicate when grandparents are the householders owning or renting the home) one would be able to attribute both financial and childrearing responsibilities to the grandparent with higher certainty.

Despite the data limitations, the author hopes to shed additional light on the characteristics of grandparents who are residing with and providing for their grandchildren. Policy and practice recommendations for addressing their needs will also be made. Special tabulations of the decennial census 2000 data are used to examine the age distribution of those thirty and older who are providing for grandchildren. This information will help to clarify which age range holds the greatest responsibility in providing for coresident grandchildren. The full age spectrum of grandparents is a topic that hasn't been sufficiently addressed in the literature. A breakdown by gender will also be included, however, due to limitations of the special tabulated data the sample is restricted to those ages sixty and above. Nonetheless, this should provide greater insight into the role played by grandfathers, a topic insufficiently addressed in the literature. A distribution by race (limited to blacks and whites, the two most prevalent racial groups in Northern Appalachia) is provided that is also limited to those ages sixty and above (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2000b). This information should help in determining whether certain groups are overrepresented or underrepresented among coresident grandparents with dependent grandchildren. A further breakdown by race and gender is also included to describe variation in grandparent caregiving across subgroups.

This study will include national data for comparison purposes; however, the focus of attention will be on West Virginia, which lies almost entirely within the Northern Appalachian subregion. The characteristics of coresident grandparent providers in West Virginia will be compared to those of their counterparts in the remaining four states that partially overlap Northern Appalachia. Areas connected to Appalachia are the focus of attention because of this region's long history of social and economic disadvantages (Billings, Blee, Lewis, Pudup, Weiler and Walls, 2000; Tickamyer, 1988), which could imply greater difficulties for coresident grandparents assuming responsibility for grandchildren. The next section reviews the literature to provide an overview of some of the factors that precipitate the formation of grandparent-grandchild households, the challenges involved, the factors associated with increased risks, and the rewards.

II. Review of the Literature

Many explanations have been offered for the growing trend of grandparents residing with and providing for dependent grandchildren. A number of scholars have attempted to explain this phenomenon using role theory (Bullock, 2004 & 2005; Landry-Meyer, 1999; Waldrop, 2003). Scholars discuss the complex problems that precipitate a transition from the role of grandparent to parent or caregiver. Grandparents may be compelled to step in before other relatives because of a special sense of role expectations or duties with which they feel obligated to conform (Ashford, Winston Leroy, and Lortie, 2006). The broad reasons for grandparents stepping into the role of parent or caregiver may be due to the inability (insufficient finances, inadequate parenting skills including abuse, poor mental or physical health, and conflicting responsibilities), absence (abandonment, incarceration often associated with substance abuse, and death increasingly linked to HIV/AIDS) or lack of desire (emotional detachment or neglect) of the actual parent (Goodman, 2001; Grant, 2000; Pebley and Rudkin, 1999; Phillips and Bloom, 1998; Wallace, 2001).

Either of the above mentioned factors may result in the threatened removal of the child from the home by child protection workers. In some situations, economic difficulties associated with teen parenting or divorce or separation among adult children has led to an increase of three-generational living arrangements (Goodman, 2001). Such living arrangements are also referred to as coresidence or intergenerational living. In the broadest sense of the term, coresidence can refer to any combination of persons residing together, which is the definition the author employs in this study. In the more narrow use of the term, grandparents may assume or share financial responsibility, but not necessarily the role of childrearer. In some cases they may actually assist as co-parents. While the limited conception of coresidence is generally associated with economic pressure, grandparent custodial care is more often due to parents being unable or unwilling to provide for their children (Pebley and Rudkin, 1999).

Researchers point out that providing financial assistance and caregiving to one's dependent grandchildren can be rewarding and challenging (Emick and Hayslip Jr., 1999; Grant, 2000; Janicki, McCallion, Grant-Griffin and Kolomer, 2000; Ruiz and Carlton-LaNey, 1999). Most scholars point out the rewards and challenges from the grandparent's perspective, however, with a much heavier emphasis on challenges. Some of the identified challenges facing grandparent caregivers include financial stress, social isolation, role restriction, and cramped living quarters (Bullock, 2004). Others include ill health, extreme poverty, limited resources and services (Fuller-Thomson and Minkler, 2005; Whitley, Kelley, and Sipe, 2001). Negotiating service systems such as funding sources and school systems are identified as special challenges (Ziebka, 2002). Another challenge, which service providers may tend to overlook, is coping with extreme stress due to fear of not being able to rear the children to adulthood or that the children would be removed from the home and placed in foster care (Wallace, 2001).

Increased levels of depression among grandparent caregivers is associated with not working outside the home, being unmarried, being younger than sixty, and having no further than a secondary education (Kolomer, McCallion, and Janicki, 2002). Rearing grandchildren with special needs is associated with an elevated level of depressive symptoms (Burnette, 2000). Similar findings associate stress among grandparents with having grandchildren with psychological and physical problems, being younger, and low family cohesion (Sands & Goldberg-Glen, 2000). However, other evidence suggests that single-parent and two-parent families exhibit higher levels of stress relative to grandparent families raising children with behavior problems (Harrison, Richman, and Vittimberga, 2000).

Some of the identified rewards of providing for grandchildren include a positive influence on future generations within the family and greater life satisfaction (Bullock, 2004). A major reward, in spite of the challenges entailed, is simply keeping the family united (Goodman, 2001). This study examines national and state level data to describe the demographic characteristics of grandparents who are providing for dependent grandchildren. The methods used in conducting this study are reviewed next.

III. Methods

This study utilizes data from the U.S. Census Bureau's (2000b) Census 2000 Special Tabulation on Aging which was developed for the Administration on Aging. The Administration on Aging maintains the online data tables for this special census extract. These special tabulations are derived from the decennial 2000 Census of the Population data. Census short forms were mailed to five out of six U.S. households. The long forms were mailed to a representative sample of one in six U.S. households. The latter forms are the ones that include questions pertaining to grandparenting.

This study's sample is limited to persons who self-identify as grandparents residing with and responsible for most of the basic needs of at least one of their own grandchildren under the age of eighteen. The census 2000 long form qualifies "responsible for most of the basic needs" by adding a clause under question 19 (part c) that reads "If the grandparent is financially responsible for more than one grandchild, answer the question for the grandchild for whom the grandparent has been responsible for the longest period of time" (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2000d).

The data is in table form and as such, does not allow for further manipulation. The selected demographic variables include age (for those ages thirty and above), gender (for those ages sixty and over), and race by gender (for those ages sixty and above). The selected race categories include those who self-identify as being of one race. They include black or African American alone and white alone.

The cross-tabulation of race and gender is limited to only those from the two largest groups in the selected geographic areas which include black alone and white alone. While individuals of other races are not singled out, they are included in the total count for age, gender, and race. The selected geographic areas include West Virginia which is located entirely within the Appalachian region and nearly entirely within its Northern subregion. The four states which partially overlap Northern Appalachia are included for comparison purposes. They include Ohio, Pennsylvania, New York, and Maryland. The results are discussed in the next section.

IV. Characteristics of Grandparents Providing for Coresident Grandchildren

1. Age Distributions

Table one provides an overview of the age distribution of grandparents living with dependent grandchildren within the selected states. National estimates are included to determine how those in West Virginia are faring relative to those in other states that partially overlap Northern Appalachia versus the nation as a whole.

Table 1: Estimated Age Distribution of Coresident Grandparents with Dependent Grandchildren by State, Ages 30 & Above, 2000.

States	Total Number	Ages 30-39	Ages 40-49	Ages 50-59	Ages 60-69	Ages 70+
WV	16,150	6.0%	28.5%	37.6%	19.9%	7.3%
OH	86,020	6.8%	31.5%	35.1%	19.7%	6.9%
MD	50,970	5.8%	26.6%	36.8%	22.4%	8.3%
NY	143,020	5.4%	25.5%	34.7%	23.8%	10.6%
PA	80,430	6.6%	27.9%	35.0%	21.7%	8.8%
U.S.	2,426,720	6.7%	29.2%	35.1%	20.9%	8.2%
Source: U.S. Census Bureau (2000b).						

The estimates indicate that there are substantial numbers of grandparents providing for their grandchildren across the age spectrum. This is noteworthy since the term “grandparent” generally conjures up images of older individuals. An estimated average of 69 percent of grandparents providing for grandchildren in the selected comparison states are less than sixty years old. Nationwide, an estimated average of 71 percent of grandparent providers are below sixty. In West Virginia the proportion is slightly higher at 72.1 percent. These figures are surprising given the emphasis of studies on grandparenting among middle-aged and older adults (Bullock, 2005; Burnette, 1997; Waldrop, 2003).

While each of the comparison states has their highest proportion of grandparent providers falling within the fifty to fifty-nine year age range, West Virginia has the highest percentage (37.6%) of all in this age group. Its proportion also exceeds the national average (35.1%) for this age range. Correspondingly, in each of the remaining age groups, its proportions fall below the national averages. Among the selected states, it has the third lowest percentage of young grandparent providers ages thirty to thirty-nine. It has the fourth lowest percentage of those in their forties, the second lowest in their sixties, and the second lowest who are ages seventy and above.

West Virginia’s proportion (27.2%) of older grandparent providers ages sixty and over falls below the national average of 29.1 percent. However, among the comparison states Ohio (26.6%) has the lowest proportion of all. The states with the higher percentages of older grandparents include New York (34.4%), Maryland (30.7%), and Pennsylvania (30.5%). New York not only has the highest percentage of older grandparent providers, it is the only state with a double digit percentage (10.6%) for those ages seventy and above.

Service providers and policy makers in states with higher concentrations of grandparent providers in upper age brackets, especially those that include many retirees, must take into account some of the likely needs of this population. Since the bulk of grandparents in their mid-sixties and above tend to be retired, they may encounter greater financial difficulties when trying to provide for a grandchild on a fixed income.

Indeed, grandparent caregivers of all ages tend to have substantial poverty rates. Estimates from the census 2000 supplementary survey summary tables (based on a much smaller national sample than that of the study data) suggest that among the selected states, their aggregate poverty rates range from a low of 17.4 percent in Maryland to a high of 25.4 percent in West Virginia.

Grandparent providers in the aforementioned states may be especially vulnerable in trying to make ends meet while caring for a grandchild. The national poverty average is 18.7 percent. Apart from Maryland, Ohio (17.6%) is the only other state among those in the study which has a poverty rate that falls below the national average (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2000c). These levels are still high relative to the national poverty rate of 12.4 percent for individuals of all ages and 9.2 percent for families in general (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2000a). Older providers may also be more prone to stress from trying to keep up with the routine demands of childrearing in cases where the parent is indeed absent from the home, especially when faced with the extra challenges involved in raising grandchildren with special needs (Sands and Goldberg-Glen, 2000). Grandparents with failing health may need assistance in coming to grips with the need to make alternative living arrangements for their grandchildren (Wallace, 2001).

Younger grandparent providers have their own set of challenges. Indeed, research indicates that younger grandparents tend to be at greater risk of depression and stress (Kolomer, McCallion, and Janicki, 2002; Sands and Goldberg-Glen, 2000). They may be balancing their resources and time in catering to the needs of their grandchildren as well as those of their own minor children. Moreover, since they are yet to reach retirement age, their attention may be split between the home, schooling, and employment. Estimates suggest that among the selected states, coresident grandparent providers' labor force participation rates (for those of all ages) range from a low of 33.2 percent in West Virginia to a high of 63.5 percent in Maryland (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2000c). One would expect the labor force participation levels to be greater among those in the younger age brackets.

While research associates not working outside the home with elevated depressive symptoms among grandparent caregivers (Kolomer, McCallion, and Janicki, 2002), employment may still present other stressors such as arranging and financing childcare services and juggling transportation of children to childcare facilities, school, and healthcare appointments with one's work schedule. The next section discusses the gender distribution of grandparent providers.

2. Gender Distributions

Table two shows the distribution of grandparents providing for coresident grandchildren by gender. The sample, however, is restricted to those ages sixty and over due to limitations of the available tabulated data. Nonetheless, the data includes an average of 30.5 percent of all grandparents providing for coresident grandchildren in the various states. This gives us a sizeable snapshot of the often overlooked roles played by grandfathers.

Table 2: Estimated Gender Distribution of Coresident Grandparents with Dependent Grandchildren by State, Ages 60 & Above, 2000.

States	Total Number	Percentage Female	Percentage Male
WV	4,410	53.7%	46.3%
OH	22,810	57.3%	42.7%
MD	15,670	59.6%	40.4%
NY	49,250	64.7%	35.3%
PA	24,470	58.2%	41.8%
U.S.	706,150	58.0%	42.0%
Source: U.S. Census Bureau (2000b).			

Unsurprisingly, at both the national and state levels grandmothers tend to assume the greatest responsibility in providing for their grandchildren. This is consistent with the findings of other studies (Fuller-Thomson and Minkler, 2005; Janicki et al., 2000; Waldrop, 2003). Their estimated percentage of caregiving ranges from a low of 53.7 percent in West Virginia to 64.7 percent in New York, versus a national average of 58 percent. Likewise, West Virginia stands out from the other states in that it has the highest estimated percentage (46.3%) of coresident grandfathers who are responsible for most of the basic needs of their grandchildren. Apart from Ohio, each of the other three comparison states had a proportion of grandfather providers which was at or below the national average. New York has the lowest percentage (35.3%) of coresident grandfather providers.

Table one had indicated that New York also has the highest estimated percentage of coresident grandparent providers in the top age bracket. This may be a reflection of the greater longevity of women, who are the bulk of providers in this state. The gender distribution would likely differ if one were able to expand the sample to include all age groups; especially since national data indicates that the ratio of women to men increases with age (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2000a). Nonetheless, the percentages of grandfather caregivers both nationally and across the selected states are much higher than expected. This is especially surprising given the tendency for scholars to focus on grandmother caregivers (Bullock, 2004; Janicki et al., 2000; Ruiz and Carlton-LaNey, 1999; Waldrop, 2003; Whitley, Kelley, and Sipe, 2001). A very salient question that arises from the data on gender concerns the extent to which male versus female grandparents are providing childrearing services as opposed to only meeting the basic financial needs for food, clothing and shelter. This is not meant to minimize the importance of financial support, but to add clarity to the notion of grandparents raising grandchildren. A related and equally important question is what percentage of such grandparents are married or with partners? In married or grandparent couple households it is likely that a disproportionate amount of childrearing is handled by one person, who is often female, as is generally the case of children residing with two parents.

Estimates suggest that the percentage of married coresident grandparent providers (of all ages) in the selected states ranges from a low of 64.8 percent in Maryland to a high of 81.2 percent in West Virginia (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2000c). The national marriage estimate for coresident grandparent providers is 72.6 percent (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2000c). The national and state rates suggest that a surprisingly high proportion of such grandparents have a partner as a potential source of support in their roles as caregivers or providers. This may be less the case for older grandmothers who tend to outlive their male partners and for blacks who tend to have relatively lower marriage rates at all age levels. As such, a higher proportion of older grandmothers and especially blacks would likely have sole responsibility for caring for their grandchildren. This could also imply that they may be in greater need of supportive services.

Higher marriage rates also tend to imply higher income levels; however, the earlier mentioned estimates indicate that coresident grandparent caregivers in West Virginia have the highest poverty rate (25.4 %). This may be partly explained by their very low labor force participation rate (33.2%), which falls well below the national average for such grandparents (57.1%). Adverse economic conditions, coupled with possibly higher levels of disability may cause some to rely on financial supports outside the labor market. The high estimated percentages of grandfathers, ages sixty and over who are providing for grandchildren, suggest that they are playing a much greater role than generally thought. One study suggests that special attention may need to be paid to older grandfathers, especially, due to their higher perceptions of powerlessness as they transition into the role of caretaker and with activities of daily parenting (Bullock, 2005). The shared responsibility of grandfathers be it financial or a combination of assistance, supplements the help offered by women, who often provide a disproportionate amount of caregiving to both older and younger generations. The next section describes the racial distribution of grandparent providers. Table three shows the percentage ratios of grandparent caregivers ages sixty and over to persons ages sixty and older for blacks and whites, the two largest groups within the selected states. This helps to determine whether or not the percentage of grandparent caregivers from a particular racial group is actually out of proportion with their percentage in the general population of persons of this age group.

Table 3: Estimated Percentage Ratio of Grandparent Caregivers Ages Sixty and Above to Total Persons Ages Sixty and Older, by Race & State, 2000.

States	Black			White		
	% of Total Caregivers (C)	% of Total Persons (TP)	% Ratio (C/TP)	% of Total Caregivers (C)	% of Total Persons (TP)	% Ratio (C/TP)
WV	8.0%	2.5%	3.20	90.0%	96.3%	.93
OH	32.0%	8.4%	3.81	63.8%	89.7%	.71
MD	55.0%	19.4%	2.84	36.3%	75.5%	.48
NY	34.1%	10.9%	3.13	32.2%	76.5%	.42
PA	28.8%	6.7%	4.30	63.0%	91.2%	.69
U.S.	29.30%	8.34%	3.51	47.5%	82.5%	.58

Source: U.S. Census Bureau (2000b).

The estimates indicate that older black grandparents in each of the states are residing with and providing for their grandchildren at rates that far exceed their population proportions among those ages sixty and above. In comparison, the rates for white grandparent providers are far less than their respective proportions of the population aged sixty and over. White West Virginian grandparent caregivers are the only ones that come close to their population proportion (ratio .93 to 1). In sharp contrast, the ratio of the percentage of grandparent caregivers who are black to the percentage of persons ages sixty and above who are black, ranges from 2.84 in Maryland to 4.30 in Pennsylvania. Nonetheless, the black ratios in three of the five states are below the estimated national black ratio of 3.51. In contrast, several of the white ratios (WV at .93, OH at .71, and PA at .69) far exceed their national estimate of .58. The greater tendency for blacks to rear or provide for their coresident grandchildren is consistent with the findings of other studies (Janicki et al., 2000; Ruiz and Carlton-LaNey, 1999). The next section examines the race by gender distributions for blacks and whites.

3. Race/Ethnic and Gender Distributions

Table four shows the distribution of grandparents providing for coresident grandchildren by race and gender. The sample is limited to blacks and whites who are ages sixty and over. The data shows distinct gender patterns by race.

Table 4: Estimated Race and Gender Distribution of Coresident Grandparents with Dependent Grandchildren by State, Ages 60 & Above, 2000.

States	Black			White		
	Female	Male	Male/Total	Female	Male	Male/Total
WV	250	100	29%	2080	1880	47%
OH	4760	2490	34%	7680	6880	47%
MD	5490	3130	36%	3020	2660	47%
NY	11940	4840	29%	8980	6880	43%
PA	4870	2180	31%	8190	7220	47%
U.S.	137,270	69,450	34%	176,080	159,470	48%
Source: U.S. Census Bureau (2000b).						

A clear gender pattern is seen among black versus white grandparent providers. The estimated percentage of black grandfather providers ranges from a low of 29 percent in West Virginia and New York to a high of 36 percent in Maryland. Whites tend to have a much higher percentage of grandfather providers. Their estimated range is from a low of 43 percent in New York to a high of 47 percent in each of the remaining states.

Despite the race differences in the gender distribution of grandparents, the states’ estimates still suggest that substantial numbers of white as well as black grandfathers are providing assistance (financial and most likely otherwise) to grandchildren. Nationally, an estimated 34 percent of black grandparent providers are male. The national estimated average of white grandparent providers who are male are 48 percent. Surprisingly, this is close to a 50-50 gender split for white grandparents. While grandmothers still bear the greatest responsibility for grandchildren, with a combined rate of 58 percent for all races ages sixty and above, they are not alone in helping with dependent grandchildren.

V. Conclusion and Recommendations

Among the selected states, West Virginia stands out from the others for a number of reasons. It has the lowest estimated number (16,150) of grandparents (ages 30 and older) providing for coresident grandchildren, which is consistent with its general population size. The range for the comparison states is from 50,970 (Maryland) to 143,020 (New York). On the other hand, it has the highest estimated proportion (37.6%) of middle-aged providers ages 50 to 59 versus a range of 34.7 percent (New York) to 36.8 percent (Maryland) for the comparison states and a national average of 35.1 percent. Its proportion (27.2%) of older grandparent caretakers (ages sixty and above) falls below the national average (29.1%) and those of the four comparison states. The supplementary data, for persons ages thirty and above, indicate that West Virginian grandparent caregivers are estimated to have the highest poverty rate (25.4%) among the selected states. This is 1.36 times the national estimated average of 18.7 percent for grandparent caregivers.

Although West Virginian grandparent caregivers have the highest estimated marriage rate (81.2%) among the selected states, versus 72.6 percent nationally, the expected income benefits of two potential wage earners are not reflected in their poverty rate. This is related to West Virginia's grandparent providers having the lowest estimated labor force participation rate (33.2%) among the comparison states. The national rate (57.1%) is 1.72 times that of West Virginia's. These sets of rates suggest that grandchildren being cared for by grandparents in West Virginia are in especially vulnerable positions in the absence of government financial assistance. Among older persons (ages 60 and above), West Virginia has the highest estimated percentage (46.3%) of grandparent caretakers who are male. The national average is 42 percent. The range for the comparison states is 35.3 percent (New York) to 42.7 percent (Ohio). One factor contributing to West Virginia's higher rate of grandfather caretakers is its high racial homogeneity (90% white). The white proportions for comparison states include a low of 32.2 percent for New York, with a national average of 47.5 percent. When you disaggregate the data by race and gender, you find that the percentage (47%) of white grandfather providers in West Virginia is actually equal to the rates of three of the comparison states. Moreover, it falls slightly below the national average of 48 percent. Since whites tend to have higher proportions of grandfather caretakers, states with higher percentages of white grandparents tend to have higher proportions of grandfathers providing for grandchildren.

The overall findings indicate that grandparents providing for coresident grandchildren in the selected states and nationally, occupy a much broader age spectrum than generally thought. With the continued graying of America and increasing rates of childbearing among women over age thirty-five, the proportion of grandparent caregivers in upper age ranges is likely to increase. Indeed, research indicates that increasing numbers of great-grandparents are also joining in as caregivers (Bean, McAllister and Hudgins, 2001). Younger and older grandparent caregivers may have both unique and similar challenges and rewards. Service providers should not overlook the special needs and circumstances of younger grandparents, nor assume that youth necessarily equates to better mental or physical health. Likewise, they should not assume that being older equates to poorer coping abilities or lack of supports. Each case must be assessed individually. On the other hand, service providers must be careful not to over focus on grandparents to the neglect of the needs of grandchildren who may be coping with grief, loss, feelings of abandonment, and other adjustment issues. Workers must assess the needs of grandparents as well as grandchildren for support services.

Supplemental data indicates that grandparent caregivers (ages 30 and over) in the selected states tend to have high levels of poverty (17.4% in Maryland to 25.4% in West Virginia) with some substantially greater than the national average of 18.7 percent. This highlights the need and importance of kinship care policies (Kolomer, 2000; Kropf and Kolomer, 2004; Phillips and Bloom, 1998). Kinship foster care as well as Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) policies must be designed to better address the financial needs of dependent grandchildren. The surprisingly high proportions (35.3% to 46.3%) of grandfather caretakers (ages sixty and over) suggests that service providers and policy makers should give more attention to males' roles and needs as current and prospective grandparent caregivers. Further research is needed to increase service providers' sensitivity to the special needs of grandfather caregivers of all age ranges. Given the high proportions (64.8% in Maryland to 81.2% in West Virginia) of married grandparent caregivers ages thirty and above, further research is needed to sort out the supportive roles played by each spouse and the differences by gender for married and unmarried custodial grandparents.

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