FACT SHEET Australia's informal kinship carers: The need for recognition and support

https://kinshipalliance.org.au/

> *We love caring for all the children and see them develop and gain confidence. It is not an easy path at times but it is not dull! Kinship care seems to be the 'Cinderella' of care, so I hope your research project might help these people.* (Grandparent carer quoted in Kiraly, 2015.)

Background

The United Nations (2010) describes kinship care as 'family-based care within the child's extended family or with close friends of the family known to the child, whether formal or informal in nature'.

State child protection authorities try to limit intervention under their legislative remit as far as possible. 2011 census data suggested that over 100,000 children were in kinship care at that time. Over 80% of kinship care families were providing care on an 'informal' basis, that is, without recognition or financial support by child protection authorities (Kiraly et al,2021; Kiraly, 2023). With population increase, the number of children in kinship care clearly now far exceeds 100,000.

It is widely believed that most kinship carers are grandparents, however current data suggests that around half of all kinship carers are other relatives or family friends. Aboriginal families are over-represented (Kiraly et al, 2021).

Issues

1. Invisibility of informal kinship care families

Informal kinship carers are invisible. They are not recognised as:

- Carers – in Commonwealth legislation, hence not eligible for carer services
- Parents – hence not eligible for parental leave. Lack of appropriate documentation often leads to difficulty obtaining birth certificates and Medicare cards for children in their care.
- Adoptive parents – hence not eligible for adoption leave.
- Foster carers – hence not financially supported.

2. Poverty in informal kinship care families

Australian and international research shows this is the biggest issue for informal kinship care families (Kiraly, 2015). Many kinship carers are pensioners and renters, often in public housing. Houses are frequently overcrowded once the children arrive. Some older carers with a home of their own have found it necessary to re-mortgage their house, others to use superannuation savings for the care of children. Some younger carers have given up study and employment to provide care, threatening their own life opportunities.

The Parliamentary Friends of Grandparent and Kinship Carers

The *Parliamentary Friends of Grandparent and Kinship Carers* provides a non-partisan forum for MPs to meet and interact with grandparent and kinship carers on matters relating to care of the kin children they are raising.

www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Friendship/Previous_Parliament_Friendship_Groups

The Friends group was re-registered in early 2023 for the 47th Parliament. In February 2025, the Co-Convenors are Tracey Roberts MP (Labor), Senator Dean Smith (Liberal) and Senator Dorinda Cox (Greens).

February, 2025

Senate Inquiries

2014 Senate Inquiry into Grandparents raising Grandchildren
2015 Senate Inquiry into Out of Home Care

Both Inquiries were chaired by Senator Rachel Siewart (Greens). Both made Recommendations to improve the lives of kinship care families. ***Little progress has been made with implementation.***

What can Federal Parliament do?

1. *Amend the Carer Recognition Act 2010 to recognise all kinship carers*

   The 2012 Queensland Act recognises all grandparent carers. The Tasmanian Act recognises all informal kinship carers but not formal kinship carers. The ACT Act and the Victorian Act recognise all formal kinship carers only. It is time to be inclusive; States/Territories may follow.

2. *Pass legislation to rename the Foster Child Health Care Card*
   https://www.servicesaustralia.gov.au/foster-child-health-care-card

   This Health Care Card is actually available to all children in the care of grandparents and other kin. Its name is misleading, doing nothing to advise of the eligibility of children in kinship care. A possible new name might be the ***Child Health Care Card (Foster & Kinship Care).***

3. *Establish a Commonwealth Informal Relative Caregiver Statutory Declaration*

   This was Recommendation 17 of the 2014 Senate Inquiry into Grandparent Care. A draft based on the ***SA Informal Relative Caregiver's Statutory Declaration*** is attached.

4. *Review the Double Orphan Pension and institute an Unsupported Child's Benefit*

   Recommendation 34 of the *2015 Senate Inquiry into Out of Home Care* included 'increasing allowances available to relative/kinship carers'. The New Zealand Unsupported Child's Benefit provides a suitable model. **https://www.workandincome.govt.nz/products/a-z-benefits/unsupported-childs-benefit.html**

   The modest Double Orphan Pension is available to children where both parents are dead, or one parent is dead and one is missing or in long-term care or incarceration. This pension has had little review since its establishment under the Whitlam Government in the 1970s. It is inappropriately named. A review should consider its name, definition, and level of payment.

5. *Revisit other relevant recommendations of the 2014 & 2015 Senate Inquiries*

   The implementation of relevant recommendations would improve life circumstances of kinship carers and children in their care.

More information

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References

Kiraly, M. (2023). *In loco parentis*: Informal kinship care in Australia – social benefit and material poverty. *Societies* 13: 227.

Kiraly, M., et al. (2021). The nature and prevalence of kinship care: Focus on young kinship carers. *Child & Family Social Work* 26: 144-152.

Kiraly, M. (2015). A review of kinship carer surveys: The 'Cinderella' of the care system? Melbourne, Australian Institute of Family Studies https://aifs.gov.au/resources/policy-and-practice-papers/review-kinship-carer-surveys accessed 13 Feb 2023. CFCA Paper No. 31 2015: 1-28.

These papers and other research material are available on request.

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