

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-20-434](#), a report to the Special Committee on Aging, U.S. Senate

Why GAO Did This Study

Grandparents and other kin often step in to provide stability and security when parents cannot care for their children. Taking on this responsibility can lead to significant hardships, especially for older caregivers. GAO was asked to study the challenges faced by grandparents and other older kin when becoming primary caregivers.

This report examines (1) what is known about the numbers of grandparents and other kin serving as primary caregivers for children, and the reasons for that care; (2) challenges kin caregivers face and how officials report addressing them in selected communities; and (3) the extent to which HHS has supported states' efforts to use relevant federal programs and initiatives. GAO analyzed U.S. Census Bureau survey and HHS administrative data; reviewed relevant literature, federal laws, regulations, guidance, and other documents; and interviewed officials from HHS, national organizations, and in four states (Mississippi, New Mexico, New York, and Ohio) and communities, selected for their relatively large numbers of grandparent caregivers and to reflect geographic and demographic diversity.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making two recommendations to HHS on sharing information and best practices with states about federal programs that serve kin caregivers. HHS did not concur, stating that the agency already provides ongoing support. GAO maintains that implementing these recommendations would be helpful.

View [GAO-20-434](#). For more information, contact Kathryn A. Larin at (202) 512-7215 or larink@gao.gov.

July 2020

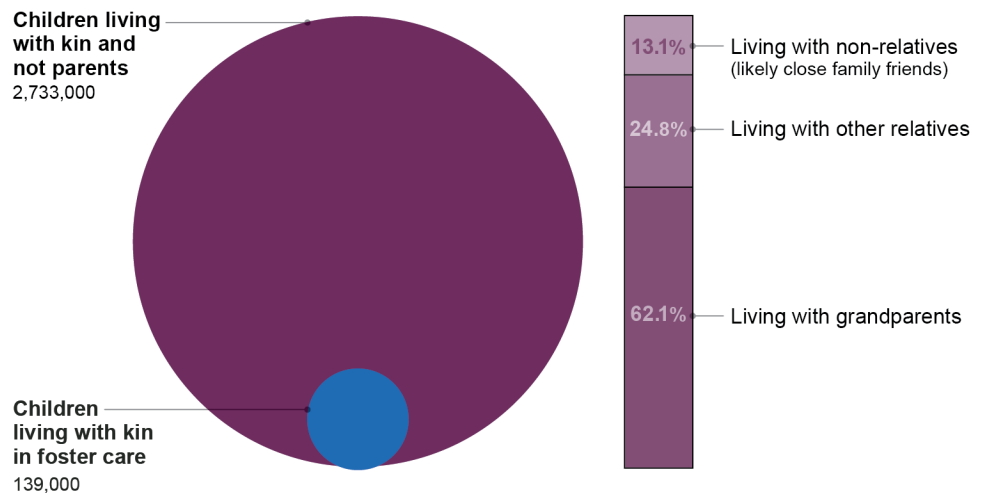
CHILD WELFARE AND AGING PROGRAMS

HHS Could Enhance Support for Grandparents and Other Relative Caregivers

What GAO Found

In 2018, an estimated 2.7 million children lived with kin caregivers—grandparents, other relatives, or close family friends—because their parents were unable to care for them. Most of these children were cared for outside the foster care system, which can affect the types of services and supports available. While children did not live with parents for a variety of reasons, parental substance abuse and incarceration were often cited in data and in interviews with program officials.

Most Children Living with Kin Are Not in Foster Care, 2018



Source: GAO analysis of HHS's Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System data and U.S. Census Bureau's Current Population Survey Annual Social and Economic Supplement 1-Year Estimates. | [GAO-20-434](#)

Challenges faced by kin caregivers include having limited financial resources and needing legal assistance, particularly when caring for children outside foster care, according to survey data and studies GAO reviewed. This is, in part, because licensed foster parents generally receive foster care maintenance payments and other services. Officials in selected communities said they have addressed some challenges by, for example, providing temporary payments or legal representation to eligible kin caregivers. However, officials also said that program eligibility criteria or insufficient funds can limit availability or result in waiting lists.

The Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) provides technical assistance and other support to help states use federal programs and initiatives established to serve kin caregivers. HHS officials said that these programs are optional, so they mainly provide assistance in response to states' requests. However, this approach has not led to widespread use. For example, 23 states used the option under the National Family Caregiver Support Program to serve older relative caregivers with 1 percent or more of their fiscal year 2016 funds (spent through 2018). State officials said they would like more guides or tools for using these programs. By not proactively sharing information and best practices, HHS may be missing opportunities to help states better support kin caregivers.