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# The Increase in Intergenerational African American Families Headed by Grandmothers

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*This article analyzes census data on grandparent heads of household. Information on African American grandparents, grandmothers in particular, is the focus of this analysis. The data include a profile of African American grandparent householders, reasons for the increase in households headed by grandparents, challenges and problems, living arrangements/household characteristics, and implications for practice. African American children are more likely to live in the home of their grandparents than are White or Hispanic children. In 1993, 12 percent of African American children lived in the home of their grandparent in comparison to 4 percent for Whites and 6 percent for Hispanics. The increased complexity of intergenerational households, along with a variety of social problems, suggest that new strategies must be developed to help these families cope.*

Demographic and socioeconomic trends have drastically influenced the structure of African American families (Billingsley, 1992). Along with structural family changes, there has been a concomitant change in grandmothers' roles and responsibilities (Burton and Dilworth-Anderson, 1991; Dilworth-Anderson, 1992). Historically, grandparents, especially grandmothers, have played

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very instrumental roles in African American extended families. Frazier (1930; 1966) appropriately described African American grandmothers as *guardian of the generations*. They have served as guardians and caretakers for their own children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren as well as for their parents and a host of other extended and fictive kin. The grandmother represents wisdom and strength while serving as the keeper of family values such as respect, religion, love and community. It was the grandmother who reminded family members of their obligations, virtues and goals. As we approach the new millennium and a new census cycle, it seems timely that we examine the primacy of the African American grandmothers' roles as healers, stabilizers, nurturers and hopegivers.

In spite of the changing demographics and contemporary role responsibilities of African grandmothers raising grandchildren, there has been little empirical research on this topic. Although it is generally understood that the grandmother role has roots in the African culture, there is very little emphasis on this issues in the literature on slavery, reconstruction, and Jim Crowism. Perhaps, this is because the grandmother role was such an integral part of the structure, function and survival of African American families. It would be difficult to overlook the current stressors and problems that grandparents, especially grandmothers, experience while functioning as surrogate parents to their grandchildren. A number of reasons account for the prevalence of grandmothers in this role. With the increase in AIDS, crime, crack-cocaine usage and incarceration of adult children, custodial grandmothers face escalating financial and social burdens as we enter the 21st century. There is an urgent need for social scientists to study aggressively the scope, nature and magnitude of the issues involved. In an effort to ensure strong and healthy families, we need to understand how these and other social and public health problems influence the daily lives and well being of African American grandparents.

### RESEARCH PERSPECTIVES

Although little is known about the contemporary roles of African American grandmothers, grandparenthood, in general,

has been explored from a number of different perspectives. Studies of White grandparents have a tendency to focus on describing different types of grandparents and examining the meaning of the grandparent role (McCready, 1985; Neugarten and Weinstein, 1964); whereas studies of African American grandparents focus on grandparents acting in the role of parent (Burton, 1992; Burton, Dilworth-Anderson, and Vries, 1995; Flaherty, Tacteau, and Garver, 1987; Minkler and Roe, 1993; Pearson, Hunter, Ensminger, and Killam, 1990; Pearson, Hunter, Cook, Ialanga, and Killam (1997). Some studies on African-American grandparents have emphasized the importance of family structure and grandparenting (Burton, 1995; Burton and Dilworth-Anderson, 1992; Wilson, 1984).

#### AFRICAN AMERICAN GRANDPARENTS AS SURROGATE PARENTS

Studies have documented grandparents, especially grandmothers, acting as surrogate parents in the case of divorce or desertion (Ahorns, and Bowman, 1982; Cherlin and Furstenberg, 1968; Gladstone, 1988; and Johnson, 1985), drug addiction (Burton, 1992; Minkler, 1991; Minkler, Rose, and Price, 1992), and adolescent pregnancy (Burton, 1995; Burton, 1995; Burton and Bengtson, 1985; Flaherty, Facticeau, and Garver, 1987; Furstenberg, 1980; Ladner and Gourdine, 1984; Thomas, 1990). A recurrent theme in the literature suggests that grandparents have a positive impact on the lives of their grandchildren. The study by Solomon and Marx (1995) found that children raised solely by their grandparents did well in relation to children in families with one biological parent present. Generally, grandparents in the role of parents seem to have a positive influence on the lives of their grandchildren.

Grandparents who have sole parental responsibilities for taking care of their grandchildren experience a number of psychological and social problems. Shore and Hayslip (1990a, 1990b) found that grandparents who had assumed total responsibility for caring for their grandchildren had reduced scores on three out of four measures of psychological well-being, including satisfaction with the grandparent role, perceptions of grandparent-grandchild relationships, and overall well-being. Burton (1992)

found that caring for grandchildren produced considerable stress for grandparents. She noted that grandparents reported feeling depressed or anxious most of the time. However, in spite of the anxiety, researchers have found the surrogate parenting role for grandparents to be both challenging and rewarding (Burton and deVries, 1993).

### CHALLENGES FACED BY AFRICAN AMERICAN GRANDMOTHERS

Multigenerational households are not a new phenomenon in African American families. Although the present trend is seen in all racial and ethnic groups, the increase in grandmother headed households is most prevalent among inner city, low income African American families. A number of reasons have contributed to the increase in grandparents assuming the role of parent. As stated above, social problems like AIDS, divorce, teenage pregnancy, abandonment, imprisonment and abuse have contributed to family disruption, leaving dependent children without reliable adult supervision and guardians. These problems, exacerbated by a lack of support from formal and informal support systems, make this group particularly vulnerable.

Despite the social, economic and health problems grandmothers face, they accept the parental responsibility of taking care of a vast number of children who would otherwise become wards of the state or "victims of the streets." Suddenly forced to sacrifice both time and money in order to care for their grandchildren, many grandmothers maintain one or more full and/or part time jobs. Some are forced to return to work after retirement. Often, African American grandmothers are responsible for taking care of several generations, including nieces and nephews, as well as parents and other elder family members.

### HOUSEHOLDS MAINTAINED BY AFRICAN AMERICAN GRANDPARENTS

According to the U.S. Bureau of the Census (1994), African American children are more likely to live in the home of their grandparents than are White or Hispanic children. In 1993, 12 percent of African American children lived in the home of their

grandparent(s), in comparison to 4 percent for Whites and 6 percent for Hispanics. Similar proportions of African American, White, and Hispanic grandchildren had only their mother present. African American grandchildren were more likely than other grandchildren to have a parent present at all and less likely to have both parents living with them in the grandparents' home. Fifty-three percent of the 1.3 million grandchildren in 1993 had only their mother present, 39 percent had neither parent present, 4 percent had both parents, and 4 percent had father only present. White and Hispanic children were equally as likely to have both parents present as to have neither present (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1994).

The Census (1994) further reports that there were 2.1 million families maintained by grandparents with grandchildren present. More than one-half of the grandparents' homes were maintained by both the grandmother and the grandfather, 43 percent by only the grandmother, and 4 percent by only the grandfather. The families maintained by White Grandparents were more likely to have both grandparents present (63 percent) than were families maintained by African American grandparents (35 percent). In African American families, the grandmother only was more likely to head the family (62 percent as compared with 33 percent for White families). Households headed by African American grandparents increased from 30 percent in 1991 to 43 percent in 1994. Among families of Hispanic origin, 53 percent were maintained by both parents and 43 percent by the grandmother only (table 1).

## AFRICAN AMERICAN FAMILIES AND CHILDREN

### *Living arrangement of children*

The proportions of families with children have declined for both the African American and White population. In 1970, nearly 2 million African American families were childless; by 1993 this number had increased nearly 75 percent to 3 million. The comparable increase for Whites was 47 percent from approximately 21 million to nearly 31 million families. In 1993, non-Hispanic White families were less likely than African American families to include children. The living arrangements of children are directly related

Table 1  
*Grandchildren of the Householder, by Presence of Parents, Race, and Hispanic Origin: 1994, 1990, 1980, and 1970  
 (Numbers in thousands)*

Living arrangement	1994				
	Total	White	Black	Hispanic*	
Total children under 18	65,508	54,795	11,177	9,496	
Grandchild of householder	3,735	2,122	1,451	539	
Percent of all children under 18	5.4	3.9	13.0	5.7	4.9
With both parents present	460	336	69	101	467
With mother only present	1,764	971	733	237	1,563
With father only present	175	142	23	43	191
Neither parent present	1,359	673	627	158	935
<b>Percent</b>	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
With both parents present	11.7	15.8	4.8	18.7	14.8
With mother only present	47.2	45.8	50.5	44.0	49.5
With father only present	4.7	6.7	1.6	8.0	6.1
With neither parent present	36.4	31.7	43.2	29.3	29.6
					42.8
					3.6
					3.2
					310
					922
					86
					988
					100.0
					13.4
					40.0
					3.7
					43.2

\* Persons of Hispanic origin may be of any race.  
 Source of 1970 and 1980 data: U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1970 Census of Population, PC(2)-4B, Persons by Family Characteristics.  
 1980 Census of Population, PC 80-4B. Source of 1994: U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1990 Census of Population, Current Population Reports, Population Characteristics, P.20-484, Marital Status and Living Arrangements: March 1994

to the marital patterns of the adult population. In today's society, children are less likely to live in traditional two-parent families and are much more likely to reside in single-parent families. This reflects the increase in divorce as well as the number of never married women who have children. Since 1970, the proportion of children living with two parents has declined for both African Americans and Whites. In 1993, approximately 10 million African American children or 94 percent lived with at least one parent. Of those living with at least one parent, 58 percent lived with the mother only and 38 percent lived with both parents. In contrast, 16 percent of non-Hispanic White children lived with their mother only and 80 percent lived in two-parent families. A similar proportion of both African American and non-Hispanic White children (Approximately 3 percent) resided with their father only (U.S. Bureau of Census, 1994).

The proportion of all children living with one parent more than doubled from 12 percent in 1970 to 27 percent in 1993. The proportion of children living with mother only almost doubled for African Americans, from 29 percent in 1970 to 54 percent in 1993, and more than doubled for Whites, from 8 to 17 percent in 1993. African American children were almost three times more likely than non-Hispanic White children to have an absent parent, 64 and 21 percent, respectively (table 2).

Children's living arrangements differed based on age groups. Children under 6 years were less likely than older children to live with both parents. Approximately one-third of African-American children under 6 lived in two-parent families, in comparison to 37 percent of 6 to 11 year old, and 39 percent of 12 to 17 year old African Americans. In contrast, 80 percent of non-Hispanic White children in two age groups under age 6, and 6 to 11 year old, and 77 percent of 12 to 17 year olds lived in two-parent families in 1993. Fifty-eight percent African American children living with the mother only in 1993, resided with never-married mother. This was more than three times the percentage of non-Hispanic White children (17 percent). Both African-American and non-Hispanic White (35 percent) children under 6 who lived with their mothers only were more likely than older children to live with a never-married mother (Bureau of the Census, 1994).

Table 2

*Living Arrangements of Children Under 18 Years, by Race and Hispanic Origin: 1991, 1980, and 1970 (Numbers in thousands. Excludes persons under 18 years old who were maintaining households or family groups and spouses)*

<i>Living arrangement</i>	1991	1980	1970	<i>Percentage Distribution</i>		
				1991	1980	1970
<b>ALL RACES</b>						
Children under 18 years	65,093	63,427	69,162	100.0	100.0	100.0
Living with:						
Two parents	46,650	48,624	58,939	71.7	71.7	85.2
One parent	16,624	12,466	8,199	25.5	19.7	11.9
Mother only	14,608	11,406	7,452	22.4	18.0	10.8
Father only	2,016	1,060	748	3.1	1.7	1.1
Other relatives	1,428	1,949	1,547	2.2	3.1	2.2
Nonrelatives only	383	388	477	0.6	0.6	0.7
<b>WHITE</b>						
Children under 18 years	51,918	52,242	58,790	100.0	100.0	100.0
Living with:						
Two parents	40,733	43,200	52,624	78.5	82.7	89.5
One parent	10,142	7,901	5,109	19.5	15.1	8.7
Mother only	8,585	7,059	4,581	16.5	13.5	7.8
Father only	1,557	842	528	3.0	1.6	0.9
Other relatives	787	887	696	1.5	1.7	1.2
Nonrelatives only						
<b>BLACK</b>						
Children under 18 years	10,209	9,375	9,422	100.0	100.0	100.0
Living with:						
Two parents	3,669	3,956	5,508	35.9	42.2	58.8
One parent	5,874	4,297	2,996	57.5	45.8	31.8
Mother only	5,516	4,117	2,783	54.0	43.9	29.0
Father only	358	180	213	3.5	1.9	2.3
Other relatives	565	999	820	5.5	10.7	8.7

*continued*

Table 2

*Continued*

<i>Living arrangement</i>	1991	1980	1970	<i>Percentage Distribution</i>		
				1991	1980	1970
<b>HISPANIC ORIGIN*</b>						
Children under 18 years	7,462	5,459	**4,006	100.0	100.0	100.0
Living with:						
Two parents	4,944	4,116	3,111	66.3	75.4	77.7
One parent	2,222	1,152	(NA)	29.8	21.1	(NA)
Mother only	1,983	1,069	(NA)	26.6	19.6	(NA)
Father only	239	83	(NA)	3.2	1.5	(NA)
Other relatives	230	183	(NA)	3.1	3.4	(NA)
Nonrelatives only	66	8	(NA)	0.9	0.2	(NA)

NA Not available

\* Persons of Hispanic origin may be of any race.

\*\* All persons under 18 years.

Source of Hispanic data for 1970: U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1970 Census of Population, PC(2)-1C, Persons of Spanish Origin.

Source of 1993 data: U. S. Bureau of the Census, 1990 Census of the Population, Current Population Reports, Population characteristics, P20-484, Marital Status and Living Arrangements: March 1994.

### CHILDREN LIVING IN GRANDPARENT HOUSEHOLDS

Since 1970, the proportion of children living with their grandparents has increased from 3 to 12 percent for African-Americans, and from 1 to 4 percent for Whites. A larger proportion of non-Hispanic White (22 percent) than of African-American children under age 6 (4 percent) living in grandparent households lived with both parents in these households. In 1993, a similar proportion of African American children (53 percent) and of non-Hispanic White children (46 percent) who lived in grandparent households also lived with the mother only. Nearly 40 percent of African American children compared with 26 percent of non-Hispanic White children living with the grandparent did not have either parent present in the household. Approximately two-thirds of African American children under 6 who lived in their

grandparents' homes lived with the mother only. This was one and one-half times the proportion of 6 to 1 year olds (45 percent (and almost twice the proportion of 12 to 17 year olds, 38 percent (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1994).

#### *Profile of African American grandparent householders*

In 1993, the median age of the African American grandparent householder was about 55 years. Approximately one-half of all African American grandchildren lived in a household where the grandparent householder had at least a high school education, and some 7 percent where the grandparent householder has at least a bachelor's degree. Grandparent households tended to be concentrated inside central cities of metropolitan areas (62 percent). About one-fourth lived in the suburbs of metropolitan areas (23 percent), and some 20 percent lived in nonmetropolitan areas. In 1991, some 20 percent of all African-American children under age 5 with working mothers were cared for by their grandparent. Many working mothers are turning to grandparents for help. In the same year, a similar proportion of African-American (12 percent) and White (8 percent) preschoolers whose mothers worked were cared for by their grandparents in their grandparents' home (U.S. Bureau of Census, 1991).

### IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The sociodemographic information presented above is useful to construct profiles of grandmothers that can be matched with various interventions. Furthermore, demographic and mortality changes in African American families have led to greater diversity in the structure and age composition of intergenerational families (Hunter, 1997). The increased complexity of intergenerational households, along with a variety of social problems, suggest that new strategies need to be presented to help these families cope. Societal ideals of the traditional grandmother role must be altered to reflect a more realistic image. The resulting image includes an intensification of both expectation and obligation. Many of the grandmothers who have total responsibility for taking care of their grandchildren did not anticipate this role as part of their life's course, and have mixed feelings about fulfilling these obligations. Their new role is met with myriad emotions that run the gamut

from anger and resentment to relief and peaceful resolve. As one grandmother, participating in a Head Start program in a major East Coast city, succinctly described it, "you do what you have to do" (Bell and Smith, 1996, p. 18).

Incorporating an Afrocentric perspective which identifies and builds on family strength is fundamental to the strategies that social workers and other human service professionals must use to assist African American grandmothers and intergenerational or "skipped generation" families. Hill (1997) noted that the culture of resilience that characterizes African-American families comes largely from the African tradition. Furthermore, he indicated, role flexibility or the interchangeability of parental roles and functions among adult family members especially grandmothers has been critical to the survival of the African American family (Hill, 1977; Wilson, 1991). Danzy and Jackson (1997) note that the African-American perspective of child care by family members other than the biological parents is "family preservation," not "child placement." Grandmothers are especially valued in the African American family. Their many roles include, providing financial and emotional support, and helping to maintain continuity while functioning as the anchor and reservoir of advice and resources. As the primary caregiver for grandchildren whose parents are not available, the custodial grandmother needs support, encouragement and reassurance in her role. The discussion below looks at services for intergenerational households headed by African American grandmothers as they take on the parenting role for their children's children. Three target groups of direct or indirect intervention—grandmothers, children and organizations/institutions are identified. Organizations such as County Departments of Social Services, Departments of Aging, schools, churches, fraternities and sororities, as well as boys and girls organizations are included in this category. Many of the resilient programs presented below can be useful for any intergenerational family or household.

Direct strategies or interventions provide ways to immediately influence the lives of these individuals while the indirect strategies are supportive and involve coordinating and linking caregivers and groups together. Pinson-Millburn, Fabian, Schlossberg and Pyle (1996) indicate that these interventions require the

least amount of professional intervention time, but are effective outreach methods. Furthermore, they provide needed supportive tangible and intangible resources while giving reassurance to the grandmothers that their responsibilities and needs are being considered and respected.

Hill (1997) identifies both direct and indirect resilient programs across the country that provide successful intervention and services for grandmothers and their grandchildren. While many of these programs were not designed specifically to serve grandmothers and their custodial grandchildren, they nonetheless, can help to meet many of the needs that these families have. These resilient programs are based on an Afrocentric paradigm which emphasizes a collective conceptualization of human beings and their group survival. Essentially the sense of the collectivity must be axiomatic to the design of resilient programs that target this population. These resilient programs inform, encourage and support grandmothers and their grandchildren alike.

Resilient programs which directly target the children while indirectly serving the grandmothers are most beneficial. PROJECT 2000 (in the Baltimore/Washington area) is an example of a resilient program that is designed to provide early intervention to enhance the academic performance of African American boys, especially those from families headed by women. PROJECT 2000 provides adult male volunteer teacher assistants in grades one through three. These men assist with classroom instruction while serving as role models (Hill, 1997) to young boys. Jawanza Kunjufu has also designed a program that targets African American male youth. The program called SIMBA is a comprehensive male-socialization program developed to prepare boys, ages 7 to 19, for the rites of passage to responsible manhood and fatherhood. Similarly Leonard Long, through the West Dallas Community Centers (WDCC) Rites of Passage Project seeks to help males and females ages 9 to 12 who are at risk of early parenting, drug abuse and criminal activity. The WDCC Rites of Passage Project, incorporated in 1988, uses an Afrocentric and holistic approach in building self-esteem, self-image enhancement, leadership development and cultural inculcation (Long, 1992). The Senior Parents' Group is an example of a resilient program which targets the grandmothers and indirectly serves the children. Established by

the Chicago Child Care Society, the Senior Parents' Group was established for parents, grandparents and other relatives who were having child rearing difficulties in middle age or later life. The goals of the group include helping members to master the common developmental tasks of their age and assisting them in coping with the stresses of being primary child rearers at their age in life (Stokes and Greenstone, 1981).

Burton (1992) found that grandparents frequently requested respite care for parenting. Out of guilt that they may have failed once as parents and out of fear that child protective services may remove the children from their care, these grandparents are often reluctant to seek opportunities for a break. Furthermore, Burton indicated that grandparents requested information on parenting and child rearing strategies. Any resilient program designed to meet these needs should be holistic and should build on the natural helping system that is in the community. This would eliminate the need to utilize the formal system and would decrease the grandmothers' fear of being judged by the service provider.

The African American family tradition may mitigate against seeking help outside the nuclear family and extended family network. A history of abuse from formal professional helpers and the residuals of segregation require that social workers and other professional helpers look for ways to involve natural helpers in meeting these families needs (Taylor, Chatters and Jackson, 1993). This history may also suggest the need for vigorous outreach through familiar and trusted institutions and organizations. In some cases, women's groups including secret orders such as the Eastern Star or the Daughters of Zion may be the source of that informal support. McPhatter (1997) notes that workers must include neighborhoods and communities as vital aspects of their practice domain. They must be intimately familiar with valuable resources offered by churches and other resilient community-based programs. Where no organizations or programs exist, social workers and other service providers must facilitate their creation. Establishing organizations of community helpers is part of the African tradition of mutual aid and support. The process of creating self-help is empowering. Moreover, it is likely to produce a program that is more effective than those which are adaptations

of programs designed for the majority culture and replicated for African Americans.

In conclusion, it is anticipated that this article will re-focus our attention and shed some light on one of our most valued, yet neglected and vulnerable populations—African American Grandmothers. Their intervention constitutes a protective factor which serves everyone in society, particularly the African American community. It is, therefore, critical that we continue to examine strategies for serving these women and their grandchildren.

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