

New study reveals the true cost of kinship care

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Cover of The Poor Relations: Children and Informal Kinship Carers Speak Out report.

A major study published today [15 April] by the University of Bristol and leading children's grant-giving charity, Buttle UK provides the most comprehensive picture to date of informal kinship care—children cared for informally by relatives and friends because their parents are no longer able to look after them

The majority of kinship care arrangements are informal; that is, they are made outside the ambit of child welfare agencies and carers have no automatic entitlement to support. Until now this has been largely a 'hidden population' about whom there were few hard facts. The findings demonstrate the true cost of informal kinship care and the huge challenges that this group of people face.

The Poor Relations: [Children](#) and Informal Kinship Carers Speak Out is the largest authoritative report to look at both the child's perspective of living in an informal kinship care setting and the views of their carers. It provides insights into how well, both emotionally and academically, these children are doing, how this compares with children in the formal care system and what impact such arrangements have on both children and carers.

It also gives an authoritative account of the [financial hardship](#), sacrifice, [isolation](#) and the cost to health of the relatives bringing up children across the UK with little or no statutory support – often at very little notice. Each child cared for by an informal kinship carer saves the taxpayer between £23,500 and £56,000 a year.

Today's report is the second of a two-part Big Lottery-funded study undertaken by the University of Bristol in partnership with Buttle UK. In June 2011 the University of Bristol published the first part of this major study—the first ever attempt to quantify informal kinship care in the UK—showing that under the 2001 Census 173,200 children— one in 77 children—were being brought up by [grandparents](#) and other relatives (This number is now likely to have risen).

Drug and [alcohol problems](#) feature heavily in the background of the parents in this new research, causing a child's move into informal kinship care – which is often sudden and crisis-driven. Findings show that just over two-thirds (67 per cent) of these children are abandoned by parents who are affected by alcohol or drug misuse, including nearly a quarter (24 per cent) who are misusing both. Exposure to domestic violence and parental mental illness was also common. These parents' chaotic lives put their children at risk and led to parental indifference (64 per cent) and to active rejection (26 per cent) of their children. Relatives and friends stepped in to care for them.

Other key findings:

- While the majority are living with a grandparent, the first part of the study published in 2011 showed that as many as 38 per cent of kinship children in the UK are being brought up by a sister or brother. They are the poorest of all informal kinship carers.
- The carers said that most of the children (88 per cent) had been abused or neglected whilst they lived with their parents
- More than a third (34 per cent) of the children had experienced the death of one or both parents – considerably more than found in recent studies of children in care.
- Most families are living in severe poverty - as a result of having the children. Fewer than a third (31 per cent) of the families can provide all the eight basic items considered by most of the population to be necessities, like heating, cooked meals and winter clothes. For example, over a third of the carers (37 per cent) cannot afford warm winter clothes and one in five cannot afford toys and sports equipment for the children. The government's cuts to welfare benefits will make their lives even more difficult.
- The fact that most receive no financial allowance from Children's Services for the children's keep is a lottery. The willingness of these informal kinship carers to step up to take care of the children is allowing local authorities to view them as private arrangements, no matter how severe the maltreatment or other difficulties they are experiencing.. The children's family backgrounds are similar to those of children in the 'looked after' system.
- Many of the informal kinship carers (73 per cent) have long-term health problems or disabilities and a third of their lives are restricted by pain. As many as two-thirds (67 per cent) are clinically depressed.

- The informal kinship carers experience multiple losses: they have to change their life plans, lose their freedom – and, if young, the chance to train for a job. They lose friends, marriages come under pressure and they can become socially isolated.
- The informal kinship carers' commitment to the children provides them with psychological security and stability. As a result the children are doing well; considerably better than children in care.
- Nonetheless, over a third (34 per cent) of the children have severe behavioural and emotional difficulties as a result of their experiences of abuse and neglect when living with their parents.
- Even though the children's backgrounds are similar to those of children in the care system, Children's Services frequently refuse them help.

Despite the often difficult circumstances of the carers, the research shows that these informal kinship arrangements provide stability for the children. The children are doing well, have strong attachments to their carers and have good levels of academic attainment, particularly when compared to children in the formal care system. Many children have high educational aspirations with half planning to go to college (47 per cent) and almost two fifths aiming for university.

They do, though, carry a great deal of anxiety about the health of their carer and what might happen to them if they are left without a home. More than a third (36 per cent) have been the butt of spiteful remarks because of their circumstances and a few have been repeatedly bullied.

However, when looking at the carers, taking these responsibilities come at a huge personal cost. While they describe their pleasure at seeing the children thrive, they find parenting children is tiring and physically demanding. Many (73 per cent) have long-term health problems or disabilities and a third say their lives are restricted by pain.

These informal kinship carers, of whom half (51 per cent) are lone carers, have foregone retirement and given up their jobs and their freedom. The young carers miss out on further education and job training and are the poorest of all. More than half of the carers (60 per cent) had to manage difficult contact with the children's parents.

Many kinship carers have feelings of hopelessness because of the restrictions on their own lives, their battles to get help and the strain of trying to manage the demands of the children with so few resources.

Buttle UK is pressing for urgent policy action for these 'Forgotten Families'. Key recommendations from the report include:

- A national allowance. The over-riding message from all four countries of the UK was the lack of financial support. Giving informal kinship carers adequate financial provision to bring up the children they care for would be an equitable solution and probably enable more [relatives](#) to take on this role.
- A culture change in statutory services. Rather than turning informal kinship carers away - afraid that they will become liable for these families – statutory agencies should provide support or ensure they refer them on so that they get the assistance they need.
- Information. A national information resource pack for each UK country which is widely promoted and easy to access. It would include information and advice about the services available from statutory and voluntary organisations and the options in relation to legal status and financial allowances.
- Improved kinship policies and practices. The needs of children and their carers should be better understood, particularly in relation to the extent of bereavement and children's behavioural difficulties, the high levels of anxiety of the children, the impact

of parental rejection and parental addiction, unreliable or harmful contact with parents and the carers' health needs. Local authorities must implement the requirement in the statutory guidance to provide accessible information and to provide support according to the child's needs.

- Better awareness among universal services such as GPs, teachers and solicitors. These are the first people to whom informal kinship carers turn. These professionals need to be attuned to their needs.

For example:

- Early independent legal advice is crucial but will now be very difficult to get with the new restrictions on legal aid. A legal aid fixed fee should be introduced to allow free advice and representation to obtain private law orders.
- GPs need to be alert to carers' high levels of depression, need for better pain management and for bereavement services.
- Schools should have a designated teacher to champion the needs of [kinship care](#) children.

Gerri McAndrew, Chief Executive, Buttle UK says: "We have seen over recent years how informal kinship carers are under a vast amount of pressure. Despite taking on a huge burden from the state by caring for children who would otherwise end up in the care system, informal kinship carers and the children they look after are still an overlooked group who experience high levels of poverty and disadvantage with little or no statutory support.

"It is remarkable that we have a situation in the UK whereby the provision of such support is not related in any way to children's needs or backgrounds or to the financial situation of the carers. This is what

Buttle UK is committed to change with the recommendations from this critical piece of research."

Professor Elaine Farmer from the University of Bristol School for Policy Studies commented: "Informal kinship carers make a major contribution to providing children with security and stability and save the state from the considerable costs of foster or residential placements. It is a matter of concern that carers' attempts to get services for needy children are sometimes summarily dismissed by statutory services, adding to the strain they are under. Government guidance that support should be based on the needs of the child rather than their legal status is not being followed."

More information: About the study:

The study, *The Poor Relations: Children and Informal Kinship Carers Speak Out* looks at 80 informal kinship carers and 80 children across the UK, split as follows: England (78 per cent), Northern Ireland (5 per cent), Scotland (11 per cent) and Wales (6 per cent). Only two previous studies on informal kinship care in the UK have been carried out in 2001 and 2006 but these had small sample sizes. Children selected for interview had been living with their carer for at least six months. The average age was 13 years. The majority – 59 per cent – were female. Just over one in five (22 per cent) were of minority ethnicity. Of the carers interviewed, 90 per cent were white British and 96 per cent were female. The youngest was a sibling of 22 years. The eldest grandmother was 79 years. Over half (51 per cent) were single.

Provided by University of Bristol

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