

Summary: 'In the Firing Line': Grandparent Carers at Risk of Family Violence.

This recently published paper (Gair, Zuchowski, Thorpe, Henderson and Munns, 2019) presents findings from a qualitative study involving three community partners: Family Inclusion Network Queensland (Townsville), Family Inclusion Network, Western Australia, and Act for Kids Queensland. All are involved in supporting families and children at risk of child protection intervention and worked with the researchers in answering the question: What are the ways that the inclusion of grandparents can be optimised after child safety concerns?

The 77 study participants were interviewed individually and in focus groups, with the sample consisting of 51 grandparents (including four aunties, three of whom identified as Aboriginal aunties undertaking a grandparent role), six foster carers (non-relative), 12 parents, and eight workers in child protection and support roles. In total, twenty-six participants in the study identified as Aboriginal Australian and one participant identified as a Torres Strait Islander, constituting 53% of the grandparent sample. This article draws on the Grandparent/ auntie participant interviews and focus groups.

In this study grandparents identified many factors impacting their families that, in turn, prompted them to become more involved in the care of their grandchildren. These factors included parental drug and alcohol misuse, child abuse and neglect, and family violence. The authors suggest “somewhat surprisingly... (that) in sharing these stories of struggling families, some grandparents located themselves as targets of ongoing anger, threats and violence” and proceed to discuss four linked themes:

1. An existing context of domestic and family violence;
2. Threats, abuse and damage;
3. Acts of physical assault; and
4. Lack of appropriate, targeted support and intervention.” (Gair et al., 2019, p. 324)

Whilst the findings reported continue to recognise the importance of grandparents staying connected to and stepping in to safeguard grandchildren after child safety concerns, they also point to the need for greater attention to the risk factors leading to grandparents becoming involved in the primary care of grandchildren.

The unravelling family circumstances prompting the removal of children from parental care was of deep concern to grandparents in this study, as was their adult children's behaviours and life struggles, and these factors are unlikely to disappear without committed, targeted intervention. For many Aboriginal families, additional contextual factors include intergenerational child protection

intervention that began with the Stolen Generation. These survivors are now grandparents.

Many Aboriginal grandmothers in this study identified that because of historical legacies, families were fearful, mistrusting and reluctant to contact 'the Department', although a reluctance to report family violence was not limited to Aboriginal participants...

Increased recognition may be needed that many Aboriginal grandparents carry the memories and the impact of growing up with trauma and family violence. They may be living in disadvantaged circumstances with limited resources but still they step in when needed to help raise children. Many might be very reluctant to report family violence directed against them by adult children for fear that the grandchildren would be removed from their care. Meanwhile, grandparents remain in the firing line. While no questions were asked about participants experiences of family violence, many Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants in this study revealed threats, abuse, damage to property and physical assault. Many identified a lack of appropriate, professional support and intervention...

There may be minimal if any safety planning for grandparent victims of family violence, not the least because it is likely to be under-reported, particularly by Aboriginal families fearful of the ramifications. (Gair et al., 2019, p. 326-327)

As has been found elsewhere, these study findings suggest that the ability of grandparent carers to protect children may rely on child protection workers implementing historically and culturally-informed, integrated practice with families and communities, and such approaches need to take more account of interconnected forms of abuse and violence and overlapping risk factors in families. (Gair et al., 2019, p. 327)

Reference

Gair, S., Zuchowski, I., Thorpe, R., Henderson, D., & Munns, L. (2019). 'In the Firing Line': Grandparent Carers at Risk of Family Violence. *Journal of Family Violence*, 34(4), 321-329.