



Caring for their Children's Children

Assessing the Mental Health Needs and Service Experiences of Grandparent Caregiver Families

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Background

According to 2000 Census data, over 100,000 Illinois grandparents are raising their grandchildren. A large number of these grandparents and children experience emotional problems that can place strains on the family.

In this study, the number of grandparent-caregiver households was mapped for all census tracts in Illinois. The maps were then used to identify and select two geographic areas with a higher concentration of grandparents raising grandchildren and seemingly fewer social service providers. The targeted areas were the south Cook County suburbs and the Joliet/Northeast Will County region. From those areas, researchers recruited and interviewed 39 grandparent-caregivers – all of whom were grandmothers – about their experiences and their need for and use of mental health services for themselves or their grandchildren. Mental health providers in those geographic areas were also surveyed about the presenting problems and service delivery challenges they have observed in their clinical work with grandparent-caregiver families.

Findings

The Struggle to Balance Work and Caregiving Responsibilities

- About a quarter of the grandmothers interviewed were currently employed, and another 26 percent

had stopped working when they assumed care of their grandchildren. Many of those who continued working talked of needing to rearrange their work schedule, change jobs, or make other special accommodations to continue to care for their grandchildren.

Emotional and Physical Health of Grandparent-Caregiver Families

- Approximately 80 percent of the grandmothers reported one or more health problems. The health problems reported most frequently were arthritis, high blood pressure, and diabetes.
- One-third of grandmothers reported symptoms of depression.
- Two-thirds of grandmothers were caring for grandchildren whom they identified as having emotional or behavioral problems.

Well-Being Among Family Members Interconnected

- The grandmothers' well-being and the grandchildren's well-being were connected. Grandmothers who reported more depressive symptoms were caring for grandchildren who scored higher on an assessment of emotional or behavioral problems.
- Grandmothers reported that the children were often thinking of their parents, which was emotionally stressful for their grandchildren and

also for themselves. As one grandmother put it:

“I can take them to school, I can feed them; clothe them, and their mind’s on their parents.”

- It was particularly challenging for children and grandmothers when the biological parents were a sporadic presence in the home:

“[The children’s mother] came back to, occasionally to visit him but then she didn’t really stay any more so I ended up with him...and it was very hard, very, very hard on him because he felt abandoned; he went through 6, yeah 6 months with his crying every night.”

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Unmet Service Needs

- Although only four of the grandparent-caregivers were currently participating in mental health services, almost half of those not participating said that they need or could benefit from mental health services, and another 15 percent said they might need or maybe could benefit from mental health services.
- Nearly half of the grandchildren with emotional or behavioral problems were already participating in mental health services. Of the remaining half, all but one grandmother perceived her grandchildren to be in need of services.

- Over 70 percent of children in the study relied on public health insurance. Yet only 20 percent of providers surveyed reported accepting Medicaid. Grandparents reported difficulties finding providers, sometimes due to location:

“All the services [the caseworker] give me, they say we’re not in your area, we can’t help you.”

Other times, it was due to cost/payment limitations:

“It’s hard to get these kinds of services with [public health insurance]...a lot of places don’t want to deal with medical cards. You can’t find anything in the phone book because there’s nothing in the phone book that lets you know they take medical cards.”

Frustration with Services Used in the Past

- A substantial number of families had received some sort of mental health service in the past. Approximately half of grandmothers of children with emotional or behavioral problems who had received services had a negative assessment of the usefulness of the services to the child. Nearly half of grandmothers who had themselves received mental health services in the past had mixed feelings or felt the services they received in the past were not that helpful.

Challenges to Accessing Mental Health Services

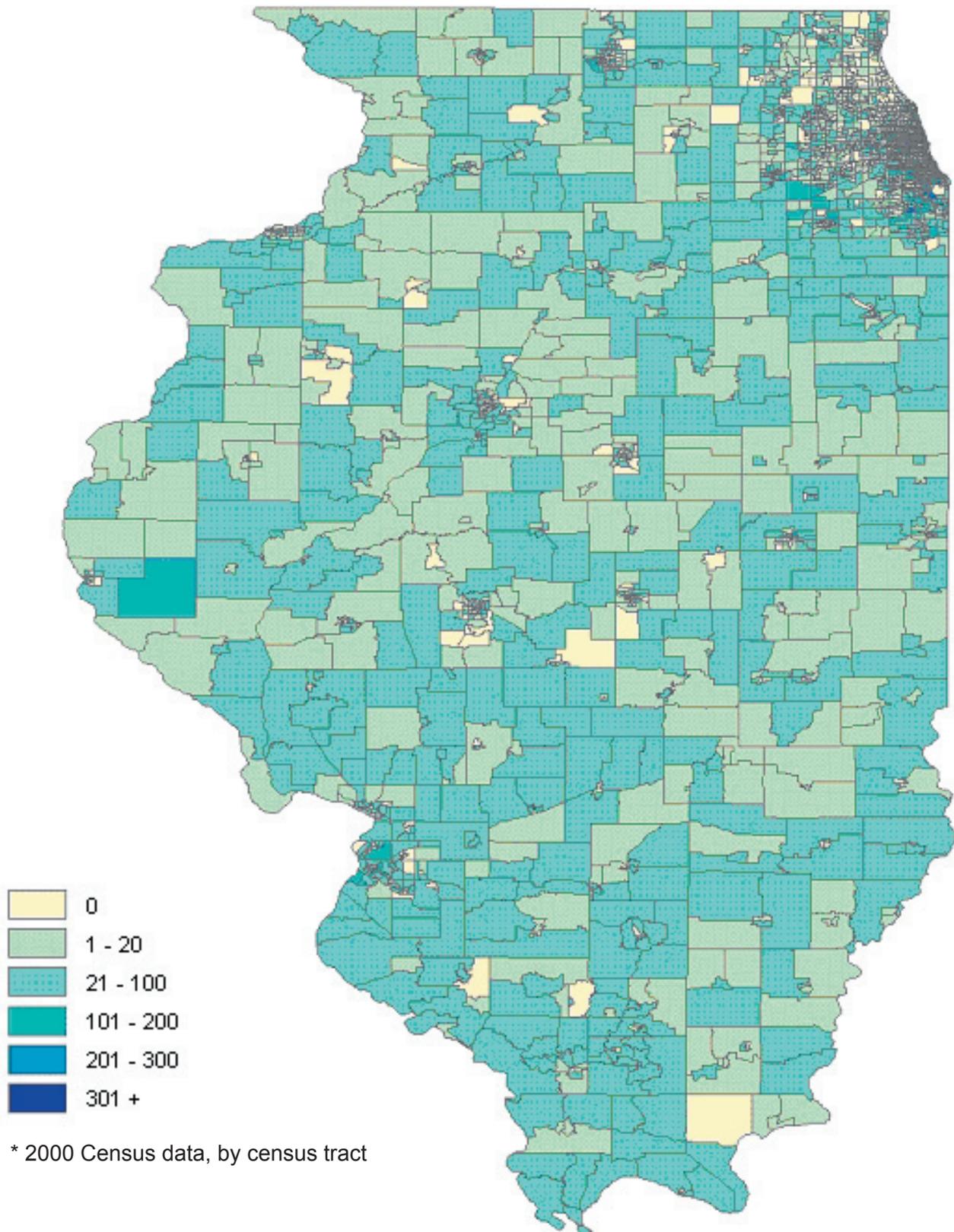
- Grandparent-caregivers identified a number of barriers to accessing and continuing services, including transportation, cost of services, and perceived lack of progress. Mental health providers reported similar challenges when working with grandparent-caregiver families.

Conclusions

With a particular emphasis on mental health service utilization, this study provides an in-depth look at the experiences of a small group of grandparent-caregiver families. The findings regarding perceived need for and experiences with mental health services have strong implications for interventions with these families. Family members whose needs rise to a clinical level are likely to benefit most from services that are family focused (i.e. services that consider the impact of stressors on the family and the impact of family members on each other). Services must also be accessible – taking into account ability to pay, proximity to home or available transportation, and the accommodation of family-level needs, such as child care and family members’ work, school, and activity schedules.

Figure 1. Number of Households where Grandparent Reports Responsibility for Grandchildren Under Age 18 in the Home - Illinois*

Almost 1,500 census tracts – representing 50 percent of all census tracts in Illinois – have between 20 and 100 grandparent-caregiver households.



* 2000 Census data, by census tract

Figure 2. Number of Households where Grandparent Reports Responsibility for Grandchildren Under Age 18 in the Home - Six-County Chicago Area*

There are over 72,500 grandparent-caregiver households in the Cook and collar county region.

