



Mercedes Bristol has been raising five of her grandchildren since 2011. Bristol, of San Antonio, Texas, founded Texas Grandfamilies Raising Grandchildren to help connect grandparents in similar situations with available resources. PROVIDED BY MERCEDES BRISTOL

‘Managing the burden and the blessing’

Grandfamilies become more common in US amid a multitude of needs and reasons

Marc Ramirez
USA TODAY

Bradley and Bonita Vinson had been happily empty-nesting for 12 years when the fallout from a family tragedy in 2016 pulled them into an unexpected role: Being responsible for raising their two young grandsons.

Having recently bought a new home in the Dallas-Fort Worth area, the Vinsons shelved a life of cruise ships and carefree couples' dinners for one of re-adjusted finances and child care considerations.

"Typically, when you have kids, you lean up," said Bradley Vinson, a 51-year-old fire/police chaplain and grief coach. "You lean on your parents. But we had no one to lean up to."

An estimated 7.8 million children nationwide are being raised in grandfamilies, a term given to families headed by grandparents or other relatives raising children that aren't theirs.

Black children are more likely to be members of grandfamilies, according to Generations United, a Washington, D.C.-based organization working to shape policy and programs to better serve multigenerational families. While Black children comprise 14% of the national population, the agency says, they represent one-quarter of all children in grandfamilies.

For the Vinsons and other grandparents raising grandchildren who may have had established traditions and memories with their parents, the holidays can be bittersweet.

"It's harder the first year, sorting out what your traditions are going to be," said Donna Butts, executive director of Generations United.

"But chances are that as a family, the kids did spend time at grandma's house for Christmas, so it's something familiar. ... It's the same cookies, the same holiday dishes."

That's one reason the group promotes grandfamilies over other foster-care situations when parents are unable or unwilling to care for their children. In recent years, grandfamilies have been created by calamities like the opioid crisis and COVID-19 pandemic.

Grandparents are 'first line of protection'

According to Generations United's 2023 report, the portion of grandparents reporting parental substance abuse as a reason for caregiving nearly doubled between 2002 and 2019, from 21% to 40%.

The states with the highest numbers

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of grandfamilies, it said, were also those with the highest rates of opioid prescription.

"Whenever we see an increase, it's something our country is grappling with," Butts said. "And grandparents really are the first line of protection."

For Black families, such issues have only compounded existing disproportionalities posed by systemic racism and health concerns. Poverty, substance abuse, domestic violence, incarceration and instability in housing and employment all play a role.

When the Vinsons took in their grandsons, they were fortunate to have a head start: They already had rooms set up in their home to accommodate the boys when they visited. When tragedy struck seven years ago, they offered to take the boys in and see how it went; and ultimately the family decided it was the best place for them to be.

The Vinsons now lead the North Texas chapter of Texas Grandparents Raising Grandchildren, a San Antonio-based organization serving more than 2,000 families statewide.

Even as they decorated their Christmas tree this year, Vinson said, the boys wanted to place ornaments on the tree in memory of the family member they had lost.

"The holidays make you think about the people who are not here," Vinson said. "It's bittersweet, because Christmas is for kids."

Most grandfamilies occur outside foster system

Most grandfamily arrangements occur outside of the foster care system, leaving them disconnected from resources available to foster-care families.

Sometimes it's by choice, as some grandparents remain hopeful their grandchildren's parents can overcome their issues and ultimately reclaim their responsibilities; others fear the prospect of still being responsible for a child at an older age.

"They think, I don't want to be raising a child when I'm 60 years old," said LaShawnDa Pittman, an associate professor of American ethnic studies and sociology at the University of Washington in Seattle.

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Pittman, author of "Grandmothering While Black: A Twenty-First Century Story of Love, Coercion and Survival"

said such arrangements are sometimes a matter of parents being too busy juggling multiple jobs or school and work responsibilities and calling on grandparents for assistance.

"Sometimes they just need help with childcare, and that morphs into the grandparents raising the grandchildren," she said.

However it happens, Butts said, grandfamilies can be more beneficial than living with strangers.

"It's much better for the children to live with relatives," Butts said. "They're more likely to feel connected to their culture and history, and they're less likely to experience multiple placements. Your family might get mad at you, but they're not going to kick you out."

In other words, she said, while displaced kids might age out of the child welfare system, they don't age out of a family.

Enjoying rewards while making sacrifices

That doesn't mean it's easy. Pittman, who interviewed grandparents ages 38 to 83, came away struck by the challenges that those without legal custody had to negotiate.

"They have to do all these things that even parents don't have to do," she said. "It's different that it was a couple of generations ago, when your grandmother could enroll you in school and take you to the doctor without having to legalize that relationship."

Some, she said, go to great lengths to assure their grandchildren get the resources and services they need.

"They do things like forge parents' signatures when needed, or they take the kids to doctors where they already have established relationships or act like, 'Yeah, they're mine,'" Pittman said. "Or they get that parent that may have a drug addiction or mental health issue and say, 'I need you to come do this legal thing,' and then you can go."

Meanwhile, while parenting grandchildren comes with rewards, it also disrupts the lives of older adults in ways they didn't expect or plan for. They put aside their own enjoyment and self-care, or tap into retirement savings, to meet the children's needs.

"It's managing the burden and the blessing," Pittman said.

"You can only do this because of profound love. Grandparents would say to me, 'My life is the only one that stopped. Everyone else's life got to go on.' They realize what they save us."

Could churches provide a respite?

Mercedes Bristol was 57 when she took custody of her five grandchildren after their parents struggled with substance abuse issues. Now 69, she's executive director of Texas Grandfamilies Raising Grandchildren, the organization she created to help other families in similar situations.

Those early days were difficult, and Bristol recalled spending many mornings seeking answers and refuge at her local church.

"I would go every day, just for strength," she said.

"A lot of older women were there going to church, and I thought, wouldn't it be great if some of these ladies could babysit while I went to the store? But none of them stepped up or said, 'I will help you.' You know what they said? They said, 'I will pray for you.' I got a little resentful, because I thought, I could use your prayers, but I could really use your hands."

Still, she's hopeful that the concept can work, that church congregations can be tapped to help grandparents negotiate responsibilities, provide backgrounded youth mentors for younger children or provide material needs like food, extra beds or car seats that often come with taking in children - "anything that helps these families not to fall apart," Bristol said.

Pittman said that in addition to community-based efforts, social safety-net programs need to make it easier for grandfamilies to access resources, including tweaking eligibility requirements to account for older adults whose extended time in the workforce may give them higher incomes but still not enough to take on unexpected parental responsibilities.

Advocates also say the language and images delivered by social and community service agencies need to be more inclusive of such families, letting grandparents know they're part of the equation.

"All of that makes a difference," said Jamarl Clark, Generations United's assistant director.

"You're already feeling like an outsider, going to schools and hearing other kids say, 'This is my mommy,' or 'This is my daddy.'"

The Vinsons say their lives have been enriched by having their grandsons around, making sure they make it to tutoring, choir and basketball practice sessions, even if they're older than most parents.

"It's not like we're out playing soccer in the backyard with them every day, but we still vacation and go to the state fair," Vinson said.

"Sometimes your own needs really go on the back burner," he said.

"It's hard making time to focus on ourselves and our health when we have appointments all the time. But we've got to be here for them."