



Parenthood in the Twenty-First Century: African American Grandparents as Surrogate Parents

Elizabeth M. Bertera & Sandra Edmonds Crewe

To cite this article: Elizabeth M. Bertera & Sandra Edmonds Crewe (2013) Parenthood in the Twenty-First Century: African American Grandparents as Surrogate Parents, *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment*, 23:2, 178-192, DOI: [10.1080/10911359.2013.747348](https://doi.org/10.1080/10911359.2013.747348)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10911359.2013.747348>



Published online: 12 Feb 2013.



[Submit your article to this journal](#)



Article views: 372



[View related articles](#)



Citing articles: 15 [View citing articles](#)

Parenthood in the Twenty-First Century: African American Grandparents as Surrogate Parents

Elizabeth M. Bertera and Sandra Edmonds Crewe

School of Social Work, Howard University, Washington, District of Columbia, USA

African American grandparents serve important roles as surrogate parents. Historically they are honored and recognized for their extraordinary service in augmenting the child welfare system. This article provides a contemporary view of the significant number of African American grandparents who serve as surrogate parents. Their assets and challenges are discussed. Following on the work by Dr. Linda Burton and collaborators in 1995, this article addresses the relationship between temporal context, developmental context, and ethnic/racial context of the life course as it relates to grandparenthood in the twenty-first century. In addition to the discussion of African American grand-parenting trends, challenges and benefits in the twenty-first century, the article presents implications of these contexts for the surrogate parenting by older African Americans relative to social work education, research, and policy.

Keywords: African American grandparents, surrogate parents, life course perspective, parenthood in the twenty-first century, African American grandparents as surrogate parents

INTRODUCTION

African American grandparents have historically provided emotional and financial support needed to ensure the well-being of their children and grandchildren. Crewe (2003) states that understanding African American elders caring for grandchildren is complex and reflects unique cultural, environmental, and institutional factors. In 1939, the eminent sociologist E. Franklin Frazier in his seminal book, *The Negro Family in the United States*, described black grandmothers as guardians of generations. Almost 75 years later, this characterization still stands. Given the substantial and disproportional number of African American grandparent-headed households, any meaningful discussion of parenthood in the twenty-first century should include their unique role as surrogate parents. Without regard to socioeconomic status, the invaluable support of grandparents is often credited by African American adults as their lifeline and an irreplaceable source of inspiration. Understanding the importance of grandparents leads to the acknowledgement that there is currently an African American grandmother in the White House. Mrs. Marian Robinson is a member of the first family and carries on many of the positive traditional roles of African American grand-parenting. In fact, it is entirely possible that the presence of an African American in the White House is because of the surrogate parental support of a grandmother. According to Grandparents.com, President Obama called Mrs. Robinson one of the unsung heroes of the

Address correspondence to Elizabeth M. Bertera, School of Social Work, Howard University, 601 Howard Place NW, Washington, DC 20059, USA. E-mail: ebertera@howard.edu.

campaign. First Lady Michelle Obama has said that “if [Mrs.] Robinson had not been available to step in and watch over the girls, Obama might never have launched his campaign. During the campaign, [Mrs.] Robinson quit her job . . . to have more time for her grandchildren.” An article in the *New York Times* states that

Mrs. Robinson helps keep the girls [Malia and Sasha] grounded amid the gilded trappings of their lives. The presence of an African American first grandmother is both indicative of the important roles that grandparents play in the lives of families and of the heterogeneity of African American grandparents.

African American grandparents are critical to the quality of life of many African American families. Whether it is the first grandmother or a grandfather who steps in because of a dysfunctional situation in the family, grandparents very often exemplify mutual assistance in the African American family. An intellectual dialogue about the role of surrogate grandparents in the African American community begs the discussion of intersectionality and the role of African American women in what Julianne Malveaux (Malveaux, 2008) describes as the third burden—the intersection of race and gender. This added burden is referenced by Dr. Height as African American women doing what is required of them versus desired by them. According to Malveaux, race, gender, and society’s treatment of African American men shape and determine the reality of African American families. Societal disparities must be considered as we critically examine the enduring role of African American grandparents as surrogate parents.

The 2010 census data confirm that African American grandparents are continuing to provide surrogate parenting to improve the quality of life of their children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren. Depending on family dynamics, grand-parenting in the African American family can be a time of great joy associated with the transmission of values and family traditions or a continuation of the cumulative disadvantage resulting in part from the institution of slavery and its legalized extension into Jim Crow and segregation. This elongated period of discrimination/segregation continues to impose stresses on many African American families and makes the grand-parenting experience for some a time of travail and hardship. Although many African American families have made great strides, others have not fared as well. Thus, too many African American grandparents, like many others, are finding themselves balancing multiple roles and possible role conflicts that are related to their being employed, married, and responsible for parental caregiving (Tepper, 2004).

Grandparents hold a unique role in the African American culture (Crewe & Wilson, 2006; Crewe, 2003). The treasured role of African American grandparents in strengthening families and ameliorating distress has been documented by many as they have chronicled their life’s journeys (Crewe, 2003, 2006). For example, through poetry and music, celebrities and entertainers such as Maya Angelou (Angelou, 1994), LL Cool Jay (Smith, 2002), and Bill Withers (Withers, 1971) pay tribute to the role of grandmothers in their upbringing. Maya Angelou’s poem “Our Grandmothers” chronicles the experience of slavery on grandmothers, and she uses her art to explain the role of grandmothers throughout the generations. In the last verse of her poem, she reminds us of the permanency and resilience of the role of grandmothers in the African American community (Angelou, pp. 340–341).

Centered on the world’s stage
 She sings to her loves and beloveds,
 To her foes and detractors:
 However I am perceived and deceived,
 However my ignorance and conceits,
 lay aside your fears that I will be undone,
 for I shall not be moved.

Similarly, the following lyrics from LL Cool J's *Unconditional Love* (Smith, 2002) recording provide context for the importance of grandmothers in the African American community:

I dedicate this to the Big Mama's everywhere
 The ones who raised us—when nobody else was there
 The ones who held us and told us it'll be alright
 When gunshots was goin off every night
 Taught us how to lock the door and check the peephole
 And how to swallow Vicks when we had a chest cold
 How to stay proud, and represent hard
 Eat plenty baby, but first say grace for God

Also, the popular media have emphasized this celebrated positive role of grandmothers through such movies as *Family Reunion* (Perry & Cannon, 2006). Additionally, African American grandfathers have been credited with supporting the development of children left in their care. The award-winning *Roots* saga emphasized the positive role of African American grandfathers and the extended family (Paseornek, Perry, & Perry, 2006). African American grandfathers, like other grandfathers, are considered as reservoirs of wisdom and the providers of knowledge and special and technical skills. Despite the long history of the disenfranchisement of African American males (Bullock, 2006), African American grandfathers have also contributed significantly to the custodial rearing of grandchildren. Most often they are called upon as a spousal dyad; however, there are grandfathers who have assumed the primary role of parenting as well.

Both custodial and noncustodial grandparents have been and continue to be the backbone of many African American families. They have filled the void that the social welfare system has failed to fully address. Despite the important roles that grandparents often play in family life, they are too often overlooked and marginalized by both policymakers and professionals. Changing demographics, including an aging population and more employed mothers, mean that the grandparents' role as informal providers of child care is becoming increasingly important. Many households headed by grandparents who have taken on the full-time role of caring for a grandchild because the parent is unable to fulfill it are particularly disadvantaged and need greater support from services (Wellard, 2010) and social workers in the child welfare system.

Research documents a lack of social workers prepared to respond to the needs of an aging population in general, and grandparents in kinship care in particular, as curricular content on grand-parenting has been limited in undergraduate and graduate social work programs (Johnson-Dalzine, 2007). This is an important gap given the fact that social workers are often practicing in the family and child welfare programs where they encounter a number of grandparents raising grandchildren. The lack of social workers prepared to respond to the needs of children raised by grandparents raises a number of questions about the training that social workers received often with limited or no content in social gerontology. Crewe (2004) also asserts that social workers need to understand the cultural diversity of older Americans to deliver the most appropriate support. Given the critical developmental needs of children, it is important to understand the contexts of grandparent involvement in childrearing as a surrogate parent (Sheridan, Haight, & Cleeland, 2011). It is also important to recognize that many African American grandparents who care for their grandchildren have had no previous attachment with the public welfare system and are very uncomfortable with being stereotyped by it. The failure of the system to appreciate this leaves both children and their surrogate parents more vulnerable in that some grandparents reject needed resources because they have worked hard to become self-supportive and avoid the stigma of dependency.

For social workers and human service professionals, understanding the role of grandparents as surrogate and co-parents is particularly important to strengthening diverse families and communities. Cultural sensitivity to historical patterns of grand-parenting and the contemporary trends

can add to the quality of life of African American older persons. Additionally, the focus on the benefits and challenges to the grandparents, grandchildren, and birth parents provides context for the next generation of family-centered policy that incorporates the needs of all three groups. This article specifically explores the literature relative to use of the life course perspective and earlier research on contexts done by Burton, Dillworth-Anderson, and Merriwether-de Vries (1994) on African American grandparents as surrogate parents to bring attention to this important cohort of parents (Burton et al.). It further presents the trends, challenges, and benefits of African American grand-parenting in the twenty-first century. It concludes with authors' suggested initiatives and implications for social work practice, policy, and research.

CONTEXTS OF SURROGATE PARENTING RESPONSIBILITIES BY GRANDPARENTS

Following the seminal work by Dr. Linda Burton and collaborators (Burton et al., 1994) researchers now know more about the relationship between temporal context, developmental context, and ethnic/racial context of the life course as it relates to grandparenthood among African Americans. Grandparents who are surrogate parents either tend to operate as co-parents by assisting their adult children in the rearing of their offspring or they assume responsibility for providing the necessary care and socialization their grandchildren require when their parents cannot. According to Dr. Burton, the surrogate parenting responsibilities of African American grandparents are hypothesized to be affected by (1) temporal, (2) developmental, and (3) ethical/racial contexts. Burton describes them as

1. temporal context, which concerns the sequence and synchronization of the assumption of surrogate parenting responsibilities by grandparents relative to their age, peer relationships, and other social role responsibilities;
2. developmental context, which focuses on how grandparents' personal development is hindered or facilitated by the assumption of the surrogate parenting role; and
3. ethnic/racial context, which refers to the cultural influences grandparents bring to the surrogate parenting role (Burton et al., 1994).

The discussion that follows addresses in greater detail each of these contexts and links them to contemporary trends.

The temporal context concerns the sequence and synchronization of the assumption of surrogate parenting responsibilities by grandparents relative to their age, peer relationships, and other social role responsibilities. Most studies find that contacts between grandparents and grandchildren are frequent (Hurme, Westerback, & Quadrello, 2010). The frequency and forms of contact are moderated by several variables such as the age of both grandparents and grandchildren, the gender of both these groups, the education of grandparents, proximity, an urban or rural context, and the middle generation's actions. Proximity would seem to be an obvious correlate of contacts as has been shown in several studies. Researchers have found a strong correlation between contact and proximity for adult grandchildren. Some studies show that the age of the grandparent influences contact frequency. Also, the age of the grandchild may influence contacts, but the results from different studies vary depending on the age range under scrutiny (Hurme et al., 2010).

Burton reported findings from two exploratory qualitative studies of the relationship between age norms, family role transitions, and the caregiving responsibilities of mothers, grandmothers, and great-grandmothers in multi-generation African American families (Burton, 1996). Families defined as having "normative on-time" transitions ($n = 23$) to the roles of mother, grandmother,

and great-grandmother were compared to families that were classified as having “early non-normative” ($n = 18$), and “early normative” transitions to the respective roles ($n = 20$). Results indicate that both the “on-time” and “early” normative transition families had an equitable distribution of caregiving duties for women across generations. In families where the transitions to mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother were considered “early” non-normative, the responsibilities for family caregiving were centered in the young great-grandparent generation (Burton, 1996). Temporal context can be related to the life course perspective.

The life course perspective developed by Bengtson and Allen (1993) can be used to emphasize the importance of time in the meaning on human development and family life. One of the concepts of time in the life course perspective refers to *generational time*, which are events or family transitions that alter interactions or selves. A second concept of time is the *historical times*, which are the events in the broader social context that alter roles or values of individuals and families (Burton, 1996).

An extensive literature review on the *generational time* for African American families contradicts the negative media that emphasize the deficits of African American families. On the contrary, a wealth of research documented that intergenerational solidarity and strong intergenerational bonds remain the rule rather than the exception for African American families. The large number of grandparents who are raising their grandchildren represents a graphic example of the strengths of intergenerational bonds, and conceptualizations of solidarity between the generations (Moore & Miller, 2007).

With regard to the *historical time* and the life course of African American grandparents, research documented that African American grandparents have developed effective internal and external coping capacities, resiliency, and adaptability to function at various ages and points in their life course and role positions. Research studies revealed that some African American grandparents have lived marginalized lives throughout their life course and despite this have become vital resources to their families and society as opposed to recipients of others’ resources. There is evidence that psychological well-being of African American grandparents raising is enhanced knowing that they are able to nurture and provide care to their grandchildren and for being able to keep their families intact (Moore & Miller, 2007). An AARP focus group participant (Crewe, 2003, p. 9) states “It makes me feel like I have accomplished something in my life ... my granddaughter just graduated from high school and she’s been accepted to Penn State.”

Developmental Context of Surrogate Parenting

The second aspect explored by Dr. Burton is that of the developmental context of surrogate parenting. Developmental context focuses on how grandparents’ personal development is hindered or facilitated by the assumption of the surrogate parenting role. Dr. Hagenstad and Burton (Hagenstad & Burton, 1986) posited that “after prolonged neglect, grandparenthood is now receiving a good deal of attention in the literature on adulthood and intergenerational relations.” This statement has not changed today. They argued that the entry into grandparenthood has become normal, expectable part of middle age, a time when daily involvement in the demands of parenthood have ceased. They continued, “that when the transition does not come in the expected life context, it may disrupt resolution of developmental tasks and hamper involvement in other roles; it may cause a series of ripple effect for other family members, affecting their life progress” (Hagenstad & Burton, 1986). An example of the developmental context is found in the following statement from a grandparent (Crewe, 2003): “There is a part of me that feel that I should not be forced to worry about my future . . . I’m spending every resource to ensure that my granddaughter is being raised a certain way. And I’m spending my future.”

Hagenstad and Burton (1986) pointed out that authors from both developmental psychology and life course perspective discuss notions of the normal expectable life as defined by a set of

seasons, with characteristic preoccupations, changes, challenges, and rewards. Within the life course perspective, the emphasis seems to be on role transitions. Transitions usually follow timetables and established sequences. Thus, off-time—especially early—transitions tend to be more difficult than life changes that come *as scheduled*, Hagenstad and Burton explained. They argued, and the authors agreed, that when the life change comes at the normal expected time, the experience is shared with peers, whereas off-time life changes may feel deviant and lack social support in the new role.

Ethnic and Racial Context

The third and last aspect hypothesized by Dr. Burton is the ethnic and racial context. Ethnic/racial context refers to the cultural influences grandparents bring to the surrogate parenting role (Burton, 1996). The cultural lens through which grandparenthood is viewed has a marked impact on the adaptation to custodial or co-parenting family structures (Goodman & Silverstein, 2002). Ethnicity is distinct from culture, referring to a group's shared sense of people-hood, based on a distinctive social and cultural heritage passed from generation to generation. In the United States, this sense of people-hood is primarily associated with race, religion, or natural origin as people identify themselves as belonging to a specific ethnic group (Cox, 2005).

Although many similarities exist among African American and White custodial grandmother caregivers, many differences are present. These differences can be traced to the destabilization caused to African American families by the institution of slavery and its pernicious effects on future generations and is clearly evident in the contemporary context. Thus, the meaning of caregiving across different racial and ethnic groups suggests different needs for research and program development (Ruiz, 2008). Hayslip (2009) write that

Relative to other influences on custodial grand-parenting that of race/ethnicity has been largely unexplored. In this light, African Americans emphasize the role of extended family and African American grandparents often play an active and respected role in the rearing of kin while Hispanic Americans tend to view grandparents' care-giving roles as extensions of their relationships with both adult children and grandchildren. Caucasian grandparents define the family as nuclear in nature and tend to be less accepting of the new grandparent-grandchild relationship when the grandparent assumes parental responsibility. Thus, cultural differences in parental expectations may also impact the success of two otherwise equally competent grandparent caregivers. (Hayslip, 2009, p. 212)

According to Cox (2008), the grandparent role itself is influenced by culture and traditions. In some societies, grandparents are relied on to care for the children while the parents work, while in others grandparents maintain a more distant relationship acting as a storyteller, family historian, and occasional babysitter. But aside from the traditional role, most grandparents raising their grandchildren had never anticipated being the primary and sole caregiver of their grandchild (Cox, 2008).

Based on a review of literature on the grandparent–grandchild relationship, Stelle (2010) concluded that one must consider the diversity and context in which the grandparent–grandchild relationship is embedded and lifelong patterns of family experiences, exchange, and attachment to understand contemporary intergenerational relationships (Stelle, 2010). It is evident that these contextual aspects formulated by Dr. Burton resonate today. More research is needed to validate and understand how these contexts affect the role that a growing number of older African Americans continue to play in the lives of their grandchildren.

In summary, the growing literature about the role of older African Americans as grandparents raising grandchildren suggests its importance for social workers in a variety of social work settings. Social work practice with African American families must include a better understanding of the

contexts and consequences of how surrogate grand-parenting affects grandchildren, their parents, and grandparents. It is important to go beyond an appreciation of the unique roles and strengths of grandparents to the collection of empirical evidence that documents the specific needs and help-seeking behaviors of surrogate parents and the children they care for and about. As previously stated, an examination of surrogate parenting in the African American community must take place within the context of disparities that linger and make indelible imprints, both positive and negative, on African American families.

AFRICAN AMERICAN GRAND-PARENTING TRENDS, CHALLENGES, AND BENEFITS IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

The Burton et al. (1994) temporal, development, and racial/ethnic contexts are evident in examining the trends, challenges, and benefits of grand-parenting in the twenty-first century. Nationwide, grandparents raising grandchildren is a growing phenomenon (Crewe, 2006), and the growth of the baby boomers is certain to swell the role of grandparent caregivers. In fact, one author describes the United States as becoming a “Granny State.” According to the 2010 United States Census, 7% of children younger than 18 years (4.9 million) reside in grandparent-headed households. According to the most recent census, between 2000 and 2010, the number of U.S. grandparents responsible for raising grandchildren increased by 30%. *Today’s Research on Aging*, a Population Reference Bureau newsletter, notes that grandparents head multi-generational and three-generational households that are formed in “response to financial difficulties, illness, divorce, adolescent childbearing, and in some instances, out of grandparents’ desire to help their children and grandchildren” (2011, p. 1). Drug/alcohol abuse, poor mental health, financial instability, military deployment (Bunch, Eastman & Griffin, 2007), chronic illness, and early death have also left parents unavailable for childrearing, leaving their elder generation responsible for tending vulnerable children (Cox, 2002). The HIV/AIDS epidemic has also been a significant contributor to African American grandparents as surrogate caregivers (Crewe, 2012).

This increasing prevalence in the United States of intergenerational surrogate parenting is posited to be compounded by the current economic recession. In fact, grandmother-headed households that include grandchildren without their parents are the fastest growing intergenerational surrogate family combination (Fitzgerald, 2001). Grandparents in kinship care represent an expanding population of older adults assuming primary parenting responsibilities for their grandchildren at a time when many grandparents may also be experiencing developmental changes accompanying their own aging process (Johnson-Dalzine, 2007). Over the past decade, grandparents have become primary caregivers for their grandchildren at an unprecedented rate. Grandparents have always played a role in the lives of grandchildren, but a significant number of older African Americans are now in the role of primary parenting well after they have completed their childbearing years. Critical masses of African American grandmothers are becoming surrogate parents for their grandchildren when the parents are unable or unwilling to provide care and are exposed to changing family dynamics (Inwood, 2002) in both positive and negative ways.

In 2000, more than 500,000 African Americans aged 45+ were estimated to be raising grandchildren. They were disproportionately female, younger, and less educated than non-caregivers (Oberlander, Black, & Starr, 2007) and more likely to be living in poverty and receiving public assistance. Grandmother caregivers had significantly higher rates of functional limitations and poverty than either grandfather caregivers or other African American women aged 45+ (Minkler & Fuller-Thomson, 2005).

As the chart below indicates, 621,887 African Americans were grandparents with primary responsibility for most basic needs of a grandchild. One child in 10 in the United States lives with a grandparent, a share that increased slowly and steadily over the past decade before rising

TABLE 1
Grandparent Caregivers, 2000–2008
Grandparents Primarily Responsible for Most Basic Needs of a Grandchild

	<i>Total</i> 2008	<i>% Change</i> 2007–08	<i>% Change</i> 2000–08
Total	2,636,728	+5	+8
Race and ethnicity			
White	1,397,090	+9	+19
Black	621,887	+2	–12
Hispanic	483,182	0	+14
Asian	89,608	–3	+9
Poverty level			
Below poverty level	468,059	+1	+2
1–3 times poverty level	1,251,111	+4	+12
3–5 times poverty level	595,608	+8	+6
5 times or higher than poverty level	303,488	+6	+4

Note. Whites, blacks, and Asians are non-Hispanic. Asians include Pacific Islanders.

Source: Pew Research Center analysis of Decennial Census and American Community Survey data.

sharply from 2007 to 2008, the first year of the current Great Recession, according to a new Pew Research Center analysis of U.S. Census Bureau data (Linnington & Parker, 2010).

According to the 2010 Census, the phenomenon of grandparents serving as primary caregivers is more common among Blacks and Hispanics than among Whites (Linnington & Parker, 2010). However, it is important to note that 2010 census data show that the percentage of White grandparents living with grandchildren increased from 46% in 2000 to 51% in 2010 as compared with a decline of African American grandparents living with grandchildren from 28% in 2000 to 24% in 2010. Despite this unexplained decline, African American grandparents are overrepresented given that African Americans are approximately 13% of the population. Among grandparents who serve as primary caregivers for grandchildren, there are notable differences by race, ethnicity, and income. More than half of grandparent primary caregivers (53%) are White, while 24% are African American, 18% are Hispanic, and 3% are Asians. In comparison, in the population ages 50 and older, 78% are White, 10% are Black, 8% are Hispanic, and 4% are Asian (Linnington & Parker, 2010; see Table 1). The 2010 American Community Survey further documents the Black or African American grandparents living with own grandchildren under 18 years by responsibility for their own grandchildren. Table 2 below provides these data:

These data document that among the 1,305,597 African American/Black grandparent-headed households, 47.6% (621,706) are responsible for their grandchildren and of those responsible 31%

TABLE 2
Black or African American Grandparents Responsible for
Own Grandchildren

<i>Age Range</i>	<i>Number of</i> <i>Grandparents</i>
30–59 years	423,958
60 years and older	197,748
Total	621,706

(197,748) are age 60 years and older. African Americans represent 18.6% of all of the grandparent-headed households and 22.7% of grandparents responsible for their own grandchildren. Given that African Americans (alone) represent 12.6% of the population, there is clear evidence of disproportionality in grandparent caregiving. Scant attention has been given to the responsibilities that African American grandparent caregivers face and how caregiving affects them when they assume the role of raising their grandchildren. The following discussion provides some limited insight on some of the challenges and benefits noted in research studies. Among the challenges and benefits identified in the literature discussed are communication, emotional strain, emotional well-being, effect of substance use, and abuse on well-being, early childhood development, grandparent health outcomes, and outcomes of children with special needs, grandfather experiences, effects of poverty, and coping and resilience.

A particularly challenging task of grandparent caregivers is communicating with their grandchildren about sexuality issues. A study by Cornelius, LeGrand, and Jemmott (2009) examined the sexual communications and attitudes and feelings toward communications between African American grandparent caregivers and their adolescent grandchildren (11–13 years of age) (Cornelius et al., 2009). Focus group methodology was used to generate data about the grandparent/grandchild sexuality communication process and attitudes and feelings toward that process. The sample included 40 dyads of African American grandparents/grandchildren, for a total of 80 participants. The study found that grandparents as well as their adolescent grandchildren desired open communication about sexuality issues. Adolescent grandchildren said that societal pressure makes sexual encounters hard to resist and felt that they needed assistance with the sexuality communication process. Nurses and social workers can build upon the study's results to assist African American grandparents and their adolescent grandchildren with sexual communication (Cornelius, LeGrand, & Jemmott, 2008).

The level of emotional role strain among African American grandparents has been recently investigated. Using role strain theory and socioemotional selectivity Theory, Francine Conway, Jones, and Speakes-Lewis (2011) examined how older grandmothers fare relative to their younger counterparts. Eighty-five custodial African American grandmothers ages 33 to 88 completed questionnaires and scales of role demand, emotional strain, caregiving strain index, and level of care. Results showed older grandmothers experienced less emotional and caregiving strain relative to younger grandmothers. Furthermore, married grandmothers experienced less caregiving strain, and their age did not insulate them from the strain associated with the level of care. Implications are discussed (Conway et al., 2011).

Another study examined whether grandparents' alcohol and/or other drug use among some grandparents may negatively affect their emotional well-being. Using a probability sample of grandparents raising their grandchildren, Longoria used multivariate analyses to show that grandparents who misused a drug and used alcohol had lower levels of emotional well-being compared with grandparents who did not use or misuse such substances (Longoria, 2010).

In a study of assessment of the importance of extended household members in children's early development, Mollborn, Fomby, and Dennis (2011) incorporated co-resident grandparents, other kin, and non-kin to investigate the associations between extended household structure and U.S. children's cognitive and behavioral outcomes at age 2. Analyses assessed whether these relationships differed for Latino, African American, and White children and tested four potential explanations for such differences. Nationally representative data came from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study-Birth Cohort of 2001 (*N* approximately 8,450). Extended household structures were much more prevalent in households of young African American and Latino children than among Whites. Nuclear households were beneficial for White children, but living with a grandparent was associated with the highest cognitive scores for African American children. Nuclear, vertically extended, and laterally extended households had similar associations with Latino children's cognitive and behavior scores. Results suggest that expanded indicators of

household structure that include grandparents, other kin, and non-kin are useful for understanding children's early development (Mollborn et al., 2011).

A study that examined the effects of caring for grandchildren on health behaviors and mental and physical health among older adults found no evidence to suggest that caring for grandchildren has dramatic and widespread negative effects on grandparents' health and health behavior. Hughes, Waite, LaPierre, and Luo (2007) found limited evidence that grandmothers caring for grandchildren in skipped-generation households are more likely to experience negative changes in health behavior, depression, and self-rated health. They also found some evidence of benefits to grandmothers who babysit. The authors used a representative sample of 12,872 grandparents ages 50 through 80 from the Health and Retirement Study. These findings suggest that the health disadvantages found previously among grandparent caregivers arise from grandparents' prior characteristics, not as a consequence of providing care. Health declines as a consequence of grandchild care appear to be the exception rather than the rule. These findings are important given continuing reliance on grandparents for day care and increasing reliance on grandparents for custodial care (Hughes et al., 2007).

A study examined support and care the Black extended-kin system provided to 34 chronically ill Black children with sickle cell anemia. Findings show that grandparents played important roles in helping provide support to the sick children's primary caregivers and to the children themselves. Grandparents provided support that complemented that of fathers, and they remained in the system of care longer than any other relative in the family. The data indicate a need to design family interventions for sick children and their parents that include grandparents (Dilworth-Anderson, 1994).

Karen Bullock (2007) explored the factors that motivated African American grandfathers who raised their grandchildren in rural North Carolina. Her study identified five factors that influenced their decision making. These factors were obligation, lack of availability of other caregivers, family tradition, role modeling, and care and concern. Additionally, the qualitative research identified three areas that impacted their caregiving success. These areas were lack of resources, feeling of powerlessness, and religious beliefs. In a study of grandparents raising grandchildren in Washington, DC, Crewe and Ritter (2003) also documented similar themes. Specifically, grandfathers in the sample noted that grandfathering provided a second chance to do for their grandchild what they were unable or to do for their children. Second-chance parenting assisted in relieving the guilt they felt about their lack of 'good' parenting during a phase of their life (Crewe, 2003).

According to Kelch-Oliver (2001), there has been an increase in grandparents raising their grandchildren due to parental absence. This family structure has affected urban, single, low-income African Americans at a higher rate than any other racial group. Research on grandchildren reared in grandparent-headed families states these children are at risk of significant emotional, behavioral, and physical problems and learning disabilities than children living with their biological parents. This exploratory study involved qualitative individual interviews with 14 African American grandchildren ages 10 to 16 and their 6 grandparent caregivers. Results indicated that although the majority of the grandchildren were content living with their grandparents, they experienced adjustment issues related to their histories of family disruption and parental loss (Kelch-Oliver, 2001).

King, Burgess, Akinyela, Counts-Spriggs, and Parker (2006) write about how the role of grandparents in family religious literature has received less attention. They note that many studies articulate the importance of family elders in the transmission of religious values, but few studies delineate the ways African American grandparents transmit their religious values to younger family members. In their qualitative study, they describe the religious dimensions of the grandparent role in a sample of 17 co-resident intergenerational African American families. Their findings show that African American grandparents provide religious instruction and guidance, model religious behavior, engage in intercessory prayer, and promote the religious significance of family

relationships, and their findings suggest that religion is an important variable in grandparent role satisfaction and that a family-level analysis of religiosity among African American elders provides a fuller understanding of religion and aging than individual-level descriptors of religiousness alone (King et al., 2006).

Neely-Barnes, Graff, and Washington (2010) explored in a sample of 119 custodial grandparents health-related quality of life (HRQOL). A latent profile analysis identified three groups of grandparents along a continuum of good to poor HRQOL, with most custodial grandparents reporting Short Form-12 Health Survey (version 2) scores significantly below U.S. population means. Grandparent and grandchild characteristics that predicted grandparent HRQOL were identified. Grandchild health problems, number of grandchildren in care, and grandparent education contributed to a moderate reduction in HRQOL. A large reduction in HRQOL was predicted by depression. Differences in depression were reported between groups, with grandparents with poor HRQOL also reporting clinically significant depression, grandparents with fair HRQOL reporting marginally clinically significant depression, and grandparents with good HRQOL reporting no depression. In a qualitative analysis, grandparent conceptualization of what they need to do to maintain and improve their health was explored for each group. Findings from the quantitative analysis indicate variation in grandparent health and mental health status and suggest that services should be tailored to address grandparent needs. The qualitative analysis highlights the importance of religion and spirituality to grandparents, the economic concerns of grandparents, and the need for trans-disciplinary service (Neely-Barnes et al., 2010).

In a study of African American grandparents rearing grandchildren in Baltimore City Public Housing, Little (2005) noted that many grandchildren live with grandparents although they are not on the lease. Thus, the grandchildren and grandparents are in vulnerable situations with children being forced to live in overcrowded conditions. The study ($n = 52$) showed that grandparents reported health problems along with the grandchildren. There was also evidence that the inadequate income of the grandparents coupled with housing authority policies placed grandparents at risk of eviction and retirement security. The emotional strain of illegally housing grandchildren is clearly a matter of great concern and creates tension in families when the grandparent is forced to jeopardize housing to accommodate grandchildren that are in need of support and assistance. There is also stress added when the grandparent must reject the grandchild to protect their housing: This is a definite strain on family relations.

Other studies (Moore & Miller, 2007) have researched the impact that parenting responsibilities have on the psychological well-being of African American grandparents raising grandchildren, which is an increasing concern in American society. Contemporary research studies indicate that African American grandparents who encounter a variety of challenges in raising their grandchildren are able to cope successfully with these situations if they derive a sufficient amount of psychological rewards from raising grandchildren. These rewards include increased gratification, feelings of usefulness, and increasing pride in their own abilities to meet new challenges (Moore, 2007).

Grandparents often face financial hardships in meeting the needs of their grandchildren. According to Crewe (2006), self-care is abandoned by grandparents as they seek to care for their grandchildren. Because of the stigma and barriers associated with governmental assistance, many grandparents rely upon their social security checks and delve into their retirement savings. Thus, too many African American grandparents are mortgaging their future (Crewe, 2003). The contemporary context of the continued dependency on grandparents as surrogate parents leads to a discussion of new directions in policy and practice.

Initiatives and Implications for Practice, Policy, and Research

African Americans have historically used their extended families and mutual support to meet the needs of their younger and older members. While this is a noted strength of the Black family, it

is one that has been born out of resilience necessitated by inequity and inattention to important segments of the community. This coupled with changing demographics of the African American family places great strain on many families to continue the care and attention ethic passed on from generation to generation. Thus policy and program initiatives have been put in place to add needed resources that can assist grandparent caregivers to better care for their grandchildren. A few public policy and practice initiatives have provided some needed assistance to surrogate and custodial grandparents.

The National Family Caregivers Support Program was authorized by the 2000 Amendment of the Older Americans Act. This Act required states and Area Agencies on Aging to expand its service network to target services for grandparents raising grandchildren. The inclusion of this population was in recognition of the substantial number of grandfamilies headed by persons 60 years and older. Since 2000, there have been a number of initiatives and programs put in place to support the needs of older grandparent headed households.

The 2003 Living, Equitably, Grandparents, Aiding Children and Youth is another federal policy that is targeted to support the unique housing needs of grandparent-headed households. These funds have supported intergenerational housing programs that have weakened or removed the housing silos and barriers that prevented many older grandparents from finding affordable housing suitable for the needs of both the child and the grandparent. Some states have put in place subsidies that provide grandparents with benefits that are more aligned with foster care payments for nonrelatives. The District of Columbia is one such jurisdiction that has put in place the Grandparent Caregiver Pilot Program Establishment Act of 2005 (Crewe, 2006) to support the needs of grandparent caregivers.

The Affordable Health Care Act is another policy that has assisted in easing the financial burden of grandparents and other relative caregivers. This Act provides for financial relief for grandparents in meeting their medical needs. For example, the inclusion of preventive services as a Medicare benefit prevents financially fragile grandparents from needed services that will safeguard their quality of life. Traditional family and child welfare systems are not sufficient to meet the needs of grandparent-headed families because these family constellations are unique and often are composed of caregivers who themselves are in need of health and financial supports. Thus the new generation of child welfare and aging policies must continue to embrace both sets of needs and respective to the life course of the caregiver. Equally important in the development of grandparent-friendly policies is the need to recognize the role that institutional racism has played in the disproportionate burden placed on African American grandparents. This is even more acute during the economic recession that has found African Americans more likely to lose employment and face foreclosures. The grandparent safety net is being strained more so than ever. Also, the economic gains made by a substantial number of older Blacks are at risk of erosion caused by added strain (Crewe, 2011). Thus, policies that protect grandparent caregivers from foreclosures and other financial and health hardships should be a top priority.

Additionally, military deployment has been identified as one of the causes for the unprecedented rates of grandparent care-giving. Thus, specific attention is needed to ensure that veteran's benefits are maximized for grandchildren who are primarily raised by grandparents. Current guidelines provide educational assistance to children of disabled veterans. Adopted grandchildren fall into this category. However, many grandparents do not wish to adopt their grandchildren, yet they could benefit from the educational benefits for children in their custody.

Since caring for a grandchild increases the likelihood of persons 60 and older remaining in the workforce, policy attention must also be given to workforce-related benefits. A major concern of grandparents having to assume custodial care is postponed retirement or the use of retirement savings. The next generation of policies should consider appropriate benefits to lessen the financial burden during retirement years. Additionally, there is great need for additional research that focuses on interventions that address a number of areas including improving health outcomes of

grandparent surrogate parents and eliminating silos between child welfare and aging programs. Additionally, research that identifies the benefits of grandparent care from the perspective of children who have been reared by grandparents is an area that is underdeveloped in the literature. Also, research is especially needed that addresses the unique needs of older surrogate parents and cohorts such as grandfathers, public housing residents, and veterans. Another important area of research is related to reunification of custodial parents. This is sometimes very stressful for parents, grandparents, and grandchildren. Social work can provide important leadership in this area of research.

African Americans have historically cared for grandchildren for myriad reasons that have been discussed. It is important, however, to emphasize that surrogate grand-parenting must not be stripped of the historical context and replaced by “overly simplistic explanations” of a complex phenomenon that took root during times when Black families served as the safety net given the racially driven economic disparities that forced parents to co-reside with their children or to assume care of grandchildren as parents sought a better life. Taking in kin and others in need is tradition in many families. What must be in the forefront of social work practice is the need for policies and programs that recognize that grandparents are often the last line of defense before the child welfare system or placement in non-relative care.

African American grandparents continue to honor the tradition of caring for “their own.” Unfortunately, the growing number of African American children in the child welfare system is placing an extraordinary burden on families and requires the blending of older Americans quality of initiatives to ensure the well-being of both the child and grandparents policies can be more effective when they approach the needs of surrogate grandparents through the contexts identified in this article. Because African American surrogate grandparents are a heterogeneous group, policies must respond to their unique needs. Thus, policy must not assume that surrogate parents are the same with regard to their informal and formal care networks. Responsive policy must consider the needs of the child, birth parents, and the grandparents. Addressing the need(s) of one group and ignoring others is a recipe for failed policy that in turn results in lowered quality of life for all involved. African American grandparents who serve as surrogate parents are a treasure and in turn should be treasured through responsible and respected public policy. The *guardians of generations* more than ever need culturally appropriate support to rear the next generation of African American children.

REFERENCES

- Angelou, M. (1994). *The complete collected poems of Maya Angelou*. New York, NY: Random House.
- Bengston, V. L., & Allen, K. R. (1993). The life course perspective applied to families over time. In P. G. Boss, W. J. Doherty, R. LaRossa, W. R. Schumm, & S. K. Steinmetz (Eds.), *Family theories and methods: A contextual approach* (pp. 469–499). New York, NY: Plenum Press.
- Bullock, K. (2007). Grandfathers raising grandchildren: An exploration of African American kinship networks. *Journal of Health and Social Policy, 22*(3/4), 181–197.
- Bunch, S. G., Eastman, B. J., & Griffin, L. W. (2007). Examining the perceptions of grandparents who parent in formal and informal kinship care. *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment, 15*(4), 93–105.
- Burton, L. M. (1996). Age norms, the timing of family role transitions, and intergenerational care-giving among aging African American women. *Gerontologist, 36*(2), 199–208.
- Burton, L. M., Dillworth-Anderson, P., & Merriwether-de Vries, C. (1994). Context and surrogate parenting among contemporary grandparents. *Marriage & Family Review, 20*(3/4), 349–366.
- Conway, F., Jones, S., & Speakes-Lewis, A. (2011). Emotional strain in care-giving among African American grandmothers raising their grandchildren. *J Women Aging, 23*(2), 113–128. doi: 10.1080/08952841.2011.561142
- Cornelius, J. B., LeGrand, S., & Jemmott, L. (2008). African American grandparents' and adolescent grandchildren's sexuality communication. *Journal of Family Nursing, 14*(3), 333–346. doi: 10.1177/1074840708321336

- Cornelius, J. B., LeGrand, S., & Jemmott, L. S. (2009). African American grandfamilies' attitudes and feelings about sexual communication: Focus group results. *Journal of the Association of Nurses AIDS Care*, 20(2), 133–140. doi: 10.1016/j.jana.2008.10.007
- Cox, C. B. (2002). Empowering African American custodial grandparents. *Social Work*, 47(1), 45–54.
- Cox, C. B. (2005). *Multicultural perspectives in working with families*. New York, NY: Springer.
- Cox, C. B. (2008). Empowerment as an intervention with grandparent caregivers. *Journal of Intergenerational Relationships*, 6(4), 465–477.
- Crewe, S. E. (2003). Elderly African American grandparent caregivers: Eliminating double jeopardy in social policy. In T. Bent-Goodley (Ed.), *African American perspectives of social welfare policy* (pp. 35–54). Binghamton, NY: Haworth Press.
- Crewe, S. E. (2004). Ethnogerontology: Preparing culturally competent social workers for the diverse facing of aging. *Journal of Gerontological Social Work*, 43(4), 45–58.
- Crewe, S. E. (2006). Different pathways to a common destiny: Grandparent caregivers in the District of Columbia. *Journal of Health and Social Policy*, 22(3/4), 199–214.
- Crewe, S. E. (2011). Are older Americans better off? *New York Times*.
- Crewe, S.E. (2012). Guardians of generations: African American grandparent caregivers for children of HIV/AIDS infected parents. *Journal of Family Strengths*, 12(1). Retrieved from <http://digitalcommons.library.tmc.edu/jfs/vol12/iss1/4>
- Crewe, S. E., & Stowell-Ritter, A. (2003). *Grandparents raising grandchildren in the District of Columbia: Focus group report*. Washington, DC: AARP.
- Crewe, S. E., & Wilson, R.G. (2006). Epilogue-kinship care: Practice and policy implications. *Journal of Health & Social Policy*, 22(3/4), 233–235.
- Dilworth-Anderson, P. (1994). The importance of grandparents in extended-kin care-giving to black children with sickle cell disease. *Journal of Health and Social Policy*, 5(3/4), 185–202. doi: 10.1300/J045v05n03_11
- Fitzgerald, M. L. (2001). Grandparent parents. Intergenerational surrogate parenting. *Journal of Holistic Nursing*, 19(3), 297–307.
- Goodman, C., & Silverstein, M. (2002). Grandmothers raising grandchildren: Family structure and well-being in culturally diverse families. *Gerontologist*, 42(5), 676–689.
- Hagenstad, G. O., & Burton, L. M. (1986). Grandparenthood, life context, and family development. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 29(4), 471–484.
- Hayslip, B. Jr. (2009). Perceptions of custodial grandparents among young adults. *Journal of Intergenerational Relationships*, 7, 209–224.
- Hughes, M. E., Waite, L. J., LaPierre, T. A., & Luo, Y. (2007). All in the family: The impact of caring for grandchildren on grandparents' health. *Journal of Gerontology, Series B Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences*, 62(2), S108–S119.
- Hurme, H., Westerback, S., & Quadrello T. (2010). Traditional and new forms of contact between grandparents and grandchildren. *Journal of Intergenerational Relationships*, 8(3), 264–280.
- Inwood, S. (2002). Family ties. Grandparents raising grandchildren. *Canadian Nurse*, 98(4), 21–25.
- Johnson-Dalzine, P. (2007). Preparing social work students to work with grandparents in kinship care: An approach to infusion of content materials into selected core social work courses. *Journal of Gerontological Social Work*, 48(3/4), 405–420.
- Kelch-Oliver, K. (2011). The experiences of African American grandmothers in grandparent-headed families. *Family Journal*, 19(1), 73–82.
- King, S. V., Burgess, E. O., Akinyela, M. A., Counts-Spriggs, M., & Parker, N. (2006). The religion dimensions of the grandparent role in three-generation African American households. *Journal of Religion, Spirituality & Aging*, 19(1), 75–96.
- Linnington, G., & Parker, K. (2010). Since the start of the great recession, more children raised by grandparents. Social & Demographic Trends Project. Retrieved from <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org> website.
- Little, B. (2005). *Who does she think she is?* New York, NY: Pocket Star Books.
- Longoria, R. A. (2010). Grandparents raising grandchildren: The association of grandparents' self-reported use of alcohol and drugs and their emotional well-being. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 80(3), 401–411. doi: 10.1111/j.1939-0025.2010.01043.x
- Malveaux, J. (2008). Shouldering the third burden: The status of African American women. In *The state of Black America* (pp. 1–7). New York, NY: National Urban League.
- Minkler, M., & Fuller-Thomson, E. (2005). African American grandparents raising grandchildren: A national study using the Census 2000 American Community Survey. *Journal of Gerontology, Series B Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences*, 60(2), S82–S92.
- Mollborn, S., Fomby, P., & Dennis, J. A. (2011). Who matters for children's early development? Race/ethnicity and extended household structures in the United States. *Journal of Child Indicators Research*, 4(3), 389–411. doi: 10.1007/s12187-010-9090-2

- Moore, R., & Miller, S. D. (2007). Coping resources: Effects on the psychological well-being of African American grandparents raising grandchildren *Journal of Health & Social Policy*, 22(3/4), 137–148.
- Neely-Barnes, S. L., Graff, J. C., & Washington, G. (2010). The health-related quality of life of custodial grandparents. *Health Soc Work*, 35(2), 87–97.
- Oberlander, S. E., Black, M. M., & Starr, R. H. Jr. (2007). African American adolescent mothers and grandmothers: A multi-generational approach to parenting. *American Journal of Community Psychol*, 39(1–2), 37–46.
- Paseornek, M., Perry, T. (Executive Producers), & Perry, T. (Director). (2006). *Madea's family reunion* (Motion Picture). United States Lionsgate Pictures.
- Perry, T., & Cannon, R. (Writer). (2006). *Madea's Family Reunion* (Motion Picture). United States Lionsgate.
- Ruiz. (2008). The changing roles of African American grandmothers raising grandchildren: An exploratory study in the Piedmont Region of North Carolina. *The Western Journal of Black Studies*, 32(1), 62–71.
- Sheridan, K., Haight, W. L., & Cleeland, L. (2011). The role of grandparents in preventing aggressive and other externalizing behavior problems in children from rural, methamphetamine-involved families. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 33(9), 1583–1591. doi: 10.1016/j.chilyouth.2011.03.023
- Smith, J. T. (Writer). (2002). *Big Mama: Unconditional love*. New York: NY: Def Jam Recordings.
- Stelle, C. (2010). Grand-parenting in the 21st Century: Issues of diversity in grandparent grandchild relationships. *Journal of Gerontological Social Work*, 53, 682–701.
- Tepper, L. M. (2004). Family relationships and support networks. In *Multidisciplinary perspectives on aging* (pp. 25–40). New York, NY: Springer.
- Wellard, S. (2010). Grandparents: An underestimated resource for children's health development. *J Fam Health Care*, 20(5), 150–152.
- Withers, B. (Writer). (1971). *Grandma's hands: On just as I am*. Hollywood, CA: Sussex Records.