

Examining Knowledge Gaps to Better Invest in Kinship Families: Summary Findings of a Scoping Review on Kinship Care

In 2023, the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) issued a final rule that allows title IV-E child welfare agencies to implement foster care licensing and approval standards tailored to kinship care.¹ With the potential for greater investment in kin families, service providers, policymakers, and child welfare practitioners need to understand what the kinship care research says—and where the gaps in understanding exist—so they can best support kin families. This summary brief provides an overview based on a [scoping review](#) of recent literature, answering key questions: What do we know about kinship care? What don't we know? And what are the next steps for kinship care research?

What do we know?

- **Children in kinship care experience more positive outcomes** compared to those in non-kin foster care. They benefit from stronger connections to their family, community, and culture,² along with greater physical health³ and well-being.⁴ These children also show fewer behavioral problems,^{4,5} increased placement stability,^{4,6} better academic performance,⁷ and more favorable adulthood outcomes, including higher employment and education rates, and lower rates of homelessness, incarceration, and reliance on public assistance.⁸ However, findings on mental health⁹ and legal permanency outcomes remain inconclusive.⁶
- **Kin caregiver outcomes are mixed.**
 - Outcomes differ by demographics,^{12,13} relationship to the child,^{13,14} and type of caregiving arrangement.
 - Kin caregivers report higher levels of stress and depression compared to non-kin foster caregivers.¹⁰
 - Kin caregivers outside of child welfare report higher levels of stress compared to the general population.¹¹
 - Resilience and social support are important mediating factors.^{13,14}

- **Kinship families need tailored support and services.**
 - Many kin caregivers do not receive housing, legal, medical, mental health, education, or economic assistance.^{15,16} Those outside the child welfare system have even less access to these services.^{17,18,10}
 - Compared to non-kin caregivers, kin caregivers—particularly those outside child welfare—experience greater financial strain.^{13,19}
 - Black, Native American, and Alaskan Native kin caregivers are offered fewer services¹³ and often avoid accessing services due to racial discrimination²⁰ and historical trauma^{21,22} with the child welfare system.

What don't we know?

- **Kinship care across different demographics.** Research rarely disaggregates data or focuses on the unique experiences of kinship families across diverse racial/ethnic identities, sexual orientations, gender identities, disability statuses, socio-economic statuses, locations, and neighborhoods.
- **Kinship outside child welfare.** Even though there are 18 times more children being raised by kin outside the child welfare system than within it,²³ few studies distinguish different types of kin arrangements or ignore kinship outside of child welfare completely.
- **Kin experiences beyond grandmothers.** Minimal attention has been given to exploring types of kin caregivers other than grandmothers: adult siblings, grandfathers, aunts, uncles, cousins, or non-relative kin.

What are the next steps for kinship care research?

1. **Explore different kinship arrangements.** Explore outcomes for children, kin caregivers, and birth parents in different arrangements inside and outside child welfare (including kinship diversion and safety planning) across demographics.^{24,25,26}
2. **Explore and compare types of kinship caregivers.** Describe and compare experiences among the diversity of kin caregivers, including grandfathers, siblings, relatives, and non-relative kin, and compare outcomes across their kin families.^{27,28,29}
3. **Look at outcomes across demographics.** Compare outcomes for children and kin caregivers across racial/ethnic communities,^{30,31,32,33} sexual orientation, gender identity, disability status, income level, location, age, religion, and legal status.
4. **Examine new measures for children, kin, and birth parents.** Explore the whole-of-family, including the strength and quality of the relationship to and outcomes for children, kin caregivers, and birth parents and the influence of the family or home environment. Consider

additional measures such as peer relationships,³⁴ family climate and community,^{33,9} self-determination,³⁵ spiritual health,²¹ sense of belonging, and trauma and healing.

5. **Unearth cultural and contextual factors** influencing kinship experiences, perspectives, behaviors, relationships, choices, motivations, and challenges.³⁶

How can the research be carried out?

- **Conduct mixed methods and participatory research that centers lived experience and is trauma-informed.** Engage kin caregivers, young people, and birth parents in identifying research questions, methods to answer them, and how to disseminate findings.
- **Invest in longitudinal studies to explore long-term experiences and outcomes.**^{37,9,4}

Read the [full scoping review](#).

Endnotes

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