

WHO PROVIDES KINSHIP CARE IN WATERLOO REGION, AND WHAT CHALLENGES DO THEY FACE?

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INTRODUCTION

In many jurisdictions, it is now preferred practice to place children who cannot remain in the parental home with "kin" rather than with unrelated foster parents (reviewed by Daly & Perry, 2011). According to Ehrle & Geen (2002), the main justifications for this preference are (1) that moving into the home of familiar, trusted, extended family tends to be a less traumatic transition than moving to a foster home, and (2) that kinship caretakers are relatively apt to feel a strong personal affection and commitment toward the children.

In Ontario, legislative changes in 2006 prioritized kin placements, which have subsequently increased in prevalence. Some are "kin care" placements, in which the child has been placed in the legal care of the child protection agency, and the agency then places the child in the particular kin home after the caregivers are approved as kin foster parents. These caregivers are then entitled to the same supports from the child protection system as traditional foster families. The other form of kinship care is "kin service" placements, in which the agency is not the legal guardian. These caregivers have fewer entitlements. We use the term "kinship caregiving" to encompass both kin care and kin service. Here, we use data from Family & Child Services of Waterloo (FACS Waterloo) to address two main questions: which categories of kin are children primarily being placed with, and what challenges do these caregivers face?

Dictionary definitions of "kin" limit the term to relatives by genealogical descent, marriage, or adoption, but in keeping with legislative guidelines, a "kin caregiver" in Ontario can also be a "neighbour or other member of the child's community" (Ontario Child Welfare Secretariat, 2006). We will refer to persons related to the child by genealogy, marriage or adoption as "related kin" and to others as "nominal kin". Perry et al (2012) found that FACS Waterloo placements with related kin were significantly more stable (longer-lasting) than placements with either unrelated foster parents or nominal kin; similar contrasts have been found in a Swedish study (Sallnäs et al, 2004) and an American study (Testa et al, 2010). Clearly, potential kinship caregivers are a heterogeneous group.

Also of interest is the relative incidence of maternal and paternal kin caregivers. One reason for examining this contrast is that the question of whether paternal kin are under-utilized as potential caregivers cannot begin to be addressed without actual incidence data. Readers will anticipate, correctly, that maternal kin predominate, if for no other reason than that many children who are taken into care had been residing with their mothers while the fathers were uninvolved and perhaps even unidentified. However, there may be some further reasons for differential participation, with subtler consequences. Many studies of kin as parental helpers, rather than primary caregivers, have reported differences between maternal and paternal relatives, especially grandparents, with respect to both their participation in child care and their impacts on child well-being (reviews by Coall & Hertwig, 2010; Sear & Mace, 2008; Flinn & Leone, 2006). Might such differences be manifested in differential willingness to provide kinship care, with the result that maternal kin caregivers not only predominate, but do so to an increasing degree as their circumstances become more challenging?

Although the benefits of kinship care noted by Ehrle & Geen (2002) are almost certainly real, they may nevertheless be counteracted, to some degree, by other disadvantages of kin placements. In both the USA and the UK, kin caregivers have lower incomes, less education, poorer housing, more children to care for, and more physical and mental health problems, on average, than unrelated foster parents, and are also much more likely to be parenting alone without the support of a partner (Barth et al., 2008; Cuddeback, 2004; Dubowitz et al, 1993; Ehrle & Geen, 2002; Farmer & Moyers, 2008; Geen, 2003; Gleeson et al., 1997; Grant, 2000; Winokur et al., 2008; Zinn, 2010). These contrasts are especially troubling when kin caregivers receive fewer institutional supports than foster parents, as is often the case (e.g. Dubowitz et al, 1993; Farmer & Moyers, 2008; Geen, 2003). Do kinship caregivers face similar challenges in Ontario?

THE CURRENT STUDY

The data considered here represent all children who came into care at FACS Waterloo (not necessarily for the first time) between January 1, 2008 and December 31, 2010, and who had one or more kin care or kin

service primary placements (i.e. not including respite placements) initiated in that 3-year period. We treat the individual placement as the unit of analysis.

The data set consists of 77 kin care and 312 kin service placements. Because some children had multiple placements and some caregivers took in multiple children, these 389 placements represent 352 individual children and 277 different caregiver homes. Eleven cases were administratively switched from kin service to kin care and one from kin care to kin service; since the children in these cases did not move, we treated any such case as one placement within the initial category.

We collected the following information from agency files: the child's age and sex; the primary kin caregiver's age, sex, and specific relationship to the child; whether there was a secondary caregiver and if so, the same demographic data as for the primary caregiver; and any available information on the caregivers' highest educational attainment, income, employment status, physical health status, mental health status, and criminal records.

RESULTS

Which "kin" are providing care?

Sixty-five of the 389 "kin" placements (16.7 %) were with "nominal kin", who were primarily either friends of the child's parents or unrelated members of the child's ethnic community. The remaining 324 placements (83.3 %) were with "related kin", of whom 214 (66% of related kin placements and 55% of all kin placements) were grandparents, and an additional 64 (19.7% of related kin placements and 16.5% of all kin placements) were aunts or uncles. Older siblings, cousins, great-grandparents, and other more distant relatives constituted the remaining 46 related kinship caregivers. These placements are broken out into kin care versus kin service placements in Table 1.

Table 1. Tally of Kin Service and Kin Care caregivers according to their relatedness to the child

	Kin Service	Kin Care	Total (n)
Nominal kin	43 (66.2%)	22 (33.8%)	65
Related kin	269 (83.0%)	55 (17.0%)	324
Grandparents	189 (88.3%)	25 (11.7%)	214
Aunts & uncles	48 (75.0%)	16 (25%)	64
Other relatives	32 (69.6%)	14 (30.4%)	46
Total	80.5% (312)	19.5% (77)	389

A significantly higher proportion of nominal kin placements were in kin care arrangements (33.8 %) than was the case for related kin (17.0 %; Chi-square, 1 df = 8.67, $p = .003$). This may be partly due to foster-to-adopt placements, but these are too infrequent to be the whole story. Since kin care provides more financial and other resources than kin service, this finding may indicate that the threshold for nominal kin to come forward is higher than for related kin. Alternatively, the difference might mean that during the placement decision process, the additional oversight that is available in kin care was more often deemed desirable in the nominal kin placements than in related kin placements.

Twelve related kin placements could not be coded as maternal or paternal, seven because the information was unavailable through our data retrieval process and five because the caregiver was the child's full sibling and therefore related through both parents. Of the remaining 312 related kin placements, those with maternal kin ($N = 208$) were exactly twice as numerous as those with paternal kin ($N = 104$). Table 2 breaks these numbers out in greater detail. It is noteworthy that although maternal kin substantially and significantly outnumber paternal kin among grandparents and "other relatives", this is not the case with aunts and uncles. In fact, uncles actually exhibit the reverse pattern, with paternal uncles significantly more numerous than maternal uncles.

