

Some kinship carers' lives get easier, most are suffering worsening hardship while others worry about children who have moved out of kinship care

1 Introduction

In 2011 KCV established a longitudinal study into the lives kinship carers. The carers in the study will be interviewed every twelve months and asked about changes in their lives.

The results of this study are used to inform the work program of KCV and to inform a range of decision makers with the power to makes decisions that affect the lives of kinship families.

The total number of interviews conducted in 2011 for the longitudinal study was 112. Contact has been lost with 16 of these cases. This means that the total number of return interviews conducted in 2012 was 96. These interviews covered 141 carers who were caring for 150 children/young people.

2 Life changes from 2011 to 2012

In 2012 the following statistical trends in the lives of the carers were identified:

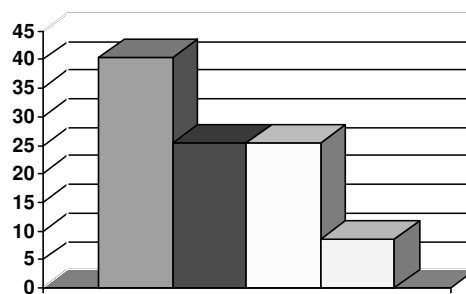
> **40.5% of carers reported deterioration** in their lives. This affects 38.7% of the children/young people in the survey.

> **25.5 % of carers reported no changes** in their lives. This affects 28.7 % of the children/young people in the survey.

> **25.5% of carers reported improvement** in their lives. This affects 26.6 % of the children/young people in the survey

> **8.5% reported that they were uncertain** about the changes in their lives. This affects 06% of the children/young people in the survey.

The table below shows the comparison of deteriorating, stable, uncertain and improved lives from the statistics above.

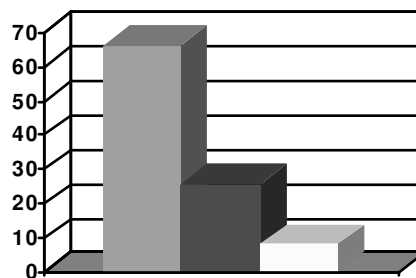


3 The majority of carers are still struggling

The 25.5% of carers who reported in 2012 that there were no changes in their lives were all experiencing hardship in 2011. These carers and those who reported in 2012 that their lives had deteriorated, (40.5%) add up to a large number of carers who are experiencing serious and/or ongoing hardship (66%).

The table diagram below shows a comparison of:

- 66% of carers experiencing serious difficulty with
- 25.5% who report positive improvements and
- 8.5% of carers who report uncertainties.



4 Carers who are uncertain about changes

4.1 Uncertain about the future for the children

Of the 96 cases re-interviewed in 2012, 25 reported that the 22 children/young people being raised between them in 2011 were no longer in their care.

The carers' sense of uncertainty was qualified by the following attitude towards the children's future prospects:

- > **Probably negative** for 10 children/young people
- > **Uncertain** for 9 children/young people
- > **Possibly positive** for 3 children/young people

4.2 Where did the children/young people go?

Of the 22 children no longer with the kinship carers it was reported that:

- > 59.1% of children/young people **have returned to their parents** (13)
- > 18.2% of the young people **came of age** (4)
- > 09.1% of children/young people have been **placed in foster care** (2)
- > 09.1% of children/young people who have been **placed with other kinship carers** (2)
- > 04.5% of children/young people have been **placed in a refuge** (1)

5 Carers who reported no changes

Carers in this category reported that their situation was largely the same as it was the last time they were interviewed – difficult.

Among carers in this category, the most commonly reported concern continued to be for the children and young people in their care and featured problems with emotional issues and trauma related behaviours.

6 Carers who say “things have improved”

6.1 Elements of positive improvement

Key elements of improvement were:

- **Improvements for the children young people**
There was a range of improvements reported:
 - > Child/young person is showing more independence (particularly in cases of older children/teens)
 - > Child/young person is doing well or showing improvement at school
 - > Child/young person is forming healthy relationships and participating in social activities
 - > Child/young person behaviour is improving

In many instances, while the carers reported improvements for the children it was clear that their personal circumstances, particularly their health had deteriorated. Still they reported improvements, proving that they view

everything through the lens of what is good for the children in their care.

- **Better access to services**

Some carers in this group indicated that they were receiving better access to services, particularly respite care in the cases of children with disabilities.

- **Positive contact with parents**

In some cases, carers noted that the children/young people in their care were benefiting from visits with their parents

Note: Some respondents indicated that it was in the best interests of the child/ren that contact with the parents should be avoided.

6.2 Challenges remain in improved situations

Among the respondents who indicated that their situation had improved, only a small minority reported that they had no concerns regarding the wellbeing of the children/young people in their care. Most respondents indicated that they are still facing challenges, whether physical, emotional or financial.

Physical concerns included injury or illness of either carers or children. Almost half of carers indicated that in spite of overall improvements in their situation, the emotional health of the children/young people in their care was still a concern. Carers noted behavioural issues related to feelings of anger, depression, anxiety, loneliness and loss of routine.

Many of the carers who reported improvements also reported deterioration in their own health. Further, as most respondents are aged in their 50s to 70s, it is not surprising that a key concern for many carers is the future of the children they are raising. This is especially true in cases where the children have special needs, such as physical or intellectual disabilities.

7 Carers who reported deteriorations

A large number of respondents reported that their situation had deteriorated since they were first surveyed.

7.1 Elements contributing to deterioration

Key elements contributing to deterioration were:

- **Custody arrangements**

The most common reason reported for this was difficulty with DHS or the courts over custody arrangements. Several carers reported that they were struggling with custody arrangements, as parents were using their free legal aid to continually bring their cases before the courts. Carers indicated that they are unable to afford the legal fees to continue to fight these actions.

▪ **Carer ill health**

A key concern was aging carers reporting that they were struggling with physical illness or emotional concerns.

▪ **Child circumstances**

Other negative changes reported by carers included:

- > negative contact with the child's parents
- > negative behaviours of the child or young person
- > financial difficulties, especially the cost of education and health care
- > increase in the number of children being cared for due to the birth of new children into the family

A large number reported emotional concerns using words key words: *depression, anger, trauma behaviours and abandonment issues*

Physical concerns raised included:

- > occasional illness or permanent disability
- > children born with drug addiction or foetal alcohol syndrome
- > issues relating to weight and healthy diet

Some carers noted that these issues led to the children or young people in their care struggling at school, and a significant number indicated that they were struggling with either the emotional or financial cost of raising children and young people with such issues.

7.2 A few positives are emerging

In spite of this, some positives were reported. Some carers reported

- children or young people doing better at school
- children or young people receiving appropriate counselling or medical treatment
- children or young people participating in activities
- better financial assistance being received

It is important to note that these minor victories in no way balanced out the negative circumstances experienced by these families.

A number of carers in this group indicated that they believed their situation could be improved by having more settled custody arrangements, whether this be a permanent care arrangement in their current situation, or a reconciliation with the child or young person's parents.

Significant numbers of carers also reported that they would like to see improvements in the child

or young person's emotional state, behaviour and educational success.

8 The importance of support groups

A large majority of carers across the whole survey sample indicated that they are connected to support groups, and are very happy with the level of support they are receiving from these groups.

A number of carers noted that they would like to attend support groups, but are unable to do so due to concerns such as

- being too busy
- not having groups near their location
- groups only being run in regular working hours

Some carers noted that there seems to be a one-size-fits-all mentality when it comes to providing kinship care support groups. A few carers suggested that they would benefit from some form of online support, for example an online chat forum that they could access at a time and place convenient for them.

A small minority of carers noted that due to the age and level of stability of the children/young people in their care, they did not feel the need to attend support groups.

Other issues also exist, for example, a small number of carers indicated that they had previously attended a group which is currently in a transition period, but had chosen to no longer attend due to conflicts with the changing dynamic of the group.

9 Improvements required

Across the board carers are seeking better access to services. Financial concerns are by far the most common, as carers are requesting:

- increased access to Centrelink benefits
- free or medical and counselling services
- free legal aid
- assistance with the cost of education

Respite

Another highly rated concern among carers is the need for respite care, either through camps or activities (school-based or community groups). Carers note that they find it difficult to have time to themselves, or socialise with people their own age.

Education

A number of carers have noted that they would like to see more assistance to improve the educational success of the children/young people in their care, and would appreciate better access to tutors or teachers' aides. Carers also note that they would like equal and respectful treatment in schools.

Service providers

It is still a major concern for some families that they are not receiving necessary information from organisations such as DHS or Centrelink. Better training for Centrelink staff to deal with the particular needs of kinship carers was suggested.

Futures planning

Some carers who indicated that they have no pressing concerns noted that they are nevertheless concerned about the future care of the children and young people they are raising, financially, emotionally etc.

10 The health of carers

In 2011, the following figures were reported in relation to the carers self assessment of the state of their health:

- > 13.2% excellent
- > 37% good
- > 39 % fair
- > 03% poor

Those collecting the survey results in 2011 held some doubts about the accuracy of these figures, reporting that the strain on carers and other anecdotal evidence suggested that carers underestimated the state of their health.

In 2012, across the sample, only a small proportion of carers indicated that they were in excellent health. Although a majority of carers indicated that they considered their health to be good, it is a concern that almost 45% rated their health as only fair or poor.

It is worthy of note that, while the majority of carers whose circumstances were considered the same or better rated their health as good or excellent, more than half of carers whose circumstances had deteriorated noted that their health was only fair or poor. A number of carers reported that they were concerned that their health was deteriorating.

11 Where to from here?

The study will continue. The carers will be interviewed for a third time in 2013.

Efforts will continue to be made to reconnect with the kinship carers who have been “lost”. The story behind their changes of address will be told in 2013 if we are able to reconnect with them.

In 2012, over fifty new carers have indicated willingness to be surveyed and to share details about their lives and views.



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