

News from the UK

## Kinship carers are unsung heroes – but they are struggling to survive

Huma Munshi – the Guardian Wednesday 14 October 2015

**The number of British children being brought up by their grandparents, aunts or other relatives has risen sharply to more than 150,000, according to recent research released. When you consider that this is more than twice the number of children who are currently in care (70,000), it becomes clear how important these kinship carers, are to society.**

A recent report by the Family Rights Group (FRG) reveals a startling picture of communities struggling to survive and a government out of touch with their needs. FRG notes that government plans to limit child tax credits to two children from 2017 will have a “disastrous impact” on the finances of thousands of kinship carers – those who take care of the children of relatives – who look after at least three children, and will deter many potential carers from taking on the role.

Some kinship carers will also be affected by the lowering of the benefit cap from April. This will limit total benefits claimable by unemployed working-age households to £20,000 or £385 a week (£23,000 or £442 in London), plunging many of those affected into food poverty, rent arrears and eviction.

The impact of the cuts will be stark and will be financial, social and cultural. Carers UK’s Caring and Family Finances Inquiry found that, because of the additional costs of caring, carers can face higher utility bills, higher transport costs and higher shopping bills. The expense is also higher if the child is disabled and requires home adaptations.

Children within the family, as well as the children moving into kinship care, are at risk of falling into child poverty. The Institute for Fiscal Studies has reported that as a direct result of tax and benefit decisions made since 2010, the number of children in relative poverty will have risen from 3.6 million to 4.3 million by 2020. Further limits to child tax credits will have a devastating impact.

The Child Poverty Action Group notes that growing up in poverty has an impact on children’s educational attainment, leads to poorer health outcomes, shorter life expectancy and it costs the broader society an estimated £29bn a year. In a cynically ideological attempt to roll back the state, this government is putting some of the poorest families under pressure and it will be society that will have to shoulder the responsibility.

The cuts will have a particularly detrimental effect on children and carers from black and minority ethnic groups. Within these groups, kinship care is far more prevalent. One in every 37 black children is being brought up by relatives, while for their white counterparts the ratio is one in 83. For many black and Asian families the idea of the family is far more fluid, it isn’t limited to two parents and their

children. The family structure often extends throughout the community. Hence, families become embroiled in notions of “honour”; family status is a complex thing when the concept of family encompasses a community. One positive outcome of this is that there is much less stigma in black and Asian communities about children being brought up by people other than their parents. In some communities children are brought up by whoever has the most resources available within the wider family group.

Carers from all backgrounds face challenges. Being a carer can lead to loneliness and isolation and this is exacerbated when coupled with poverty. It makes it harder to maintain relationships and friendships or take part in social activities. This affects both parents and children. Research shows that children of depressed parents are at high risk for depression themselves, as well as for substance abuse and antisocial activities. When a government takes away people’s ability to live meaningful lives it creates a vacuum in its place where survival is painful and difficult.

There is also a cultural cost when support to kinship carers is cut. Kinship carers are doing a job that would otherwise fall to the state. Children move into kinship care for a variety of reasons, including neglect or abuse by their birth parents, parental illness, addiction, imprisonment or death. If fewer people feel able to become kinship carers in future, more children are likely to end up in state care. Children who are in care experience some of the poorest outcomes: they are four times more likely than their peers to experience mental health problems; they do less well at school; they experience further neglect; 34% are not in education or training at the age of 19 compared to 15.5% of the general population. I could go on.

The role of kinship carers is the essence of what this Tory government once called the “big society”. These carers are providing children with the life chances and opportunities which they would not find in state care. There can be no doubt about this, the evidence speaks for itself. The government needs to do much more to support these carers so they are not merely struggling to survive, but so that they have the opportunity to thrive and give these children the chances they deserve. Poverty cannot continue to devastate communities.

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