



Use of Relative Care by Working Parents

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Many parents rely on relatives to care for their children while they are at work. In 2002, approximately 26.7 percent of children under age 13 with an employed parent spent at least some time in relative care on a regular basis, whether in the child's home or the relative's. This estimate translates into 8.9 million children regularly spending time in relative care; of these children, 6.4 million received no other nonparental care.

Parents choose relative care for many reasons. It may be the only option they can find or afford, it may accommodate nontraditional or shifting work schedules, it may allow them to place their children in the care of someone they know and trust, or it may meet some combination of these needs (Brandon et al. 2002; Lesser et al. 2003). The prevalence and importance of relative care for families underscores the need to develop strategies for supporting relative caregivers. Yet public agencies and nonprofits offering these supports may find it harder to connect with relative caregivers than with regulated providers such as center-based or family child care, who are more easily identifiable.

While the use of relative care has generally not changed between 1999 and 2002, appreciation of its importance has grown, as has the realization that policymakers lack a basic picture of such care. This Snapshot uses the 1999 and 2002 rounds of the National Survey of America's Families (NSAF) to examine working parents' use of relatives as caregivers for children under age 13.¹ It reports the percentage of children who regularly spend some time each week in relative care and the shares of children who are in relative care exclusively and in relative care combined with another form of child care.² It also shows the percentage of children in relative care who are in relative care full time (35 or more hours a week). Because child care arrangements can vary significantly by age, the Snapshot looks at children in four age groups: under 3, 3 to 4, 6 to 9, and 10 to 12.³

Children in Relative Care

Younger children were more likely than older ones to spend time in relative care. In 2002, 33.0 percent of children under age 3 and

31.4 percent of those age 3 to 4 received some care from relatives, compared with 25.6 percent of 6- to 9-year-olds and 20.2 percent of 10- to 12-year-olds (table 1).

Infants and toddlers were more likely to be in relative care as their only arrangement than children in other age groups. Over one-quarter of children under age 3 were in relative care only, compared with approximately one-fifth of children in the other three groups. Use of relative care in combination with other child care arrangements also varied by age. Fourteen percent of children age 3 to 4 were in relative care as part of a combined care arrangement. Few children in the remaining age groups were in relative care as part of a combination of arrangements.

The percentage of children who received any relative care while a parent was working was largely unchanged between 1999 and 2002. The only statistically significant change was the roughly 4 percentage point drop among 10- to 12-year-olds.

Children Receiving Full-Time Relative Care

Many children of working parents spent 35 or more hours a week in the care of a relative (table 2). Younger children were generally more likely to be in full-time relative care because older children spend much of their day in school. More than one-third of children under age 3 and between ages 3 and 4 who were in relative care in 2002

were in that care full time, compared with less than one-fifth of older children. The percentage of children in full-time relative care changed little between 1999 and 2002, regardless of age group.

Conclusion

Many children spent significant amounts of time in relative care. For most of these children, relative care is their only care arrangement. Consequently, the quality of care provided is important, especially for families that rely solely on relative care. The question of quality raises issues of how policymakers can connect with relative caregivers and help them provide a safe and developmentally stimulating setting for children. These issues may have particular

DATA AT A GLANCE

8.9 MILLION CHILDREN REGULARLY SPENT TIME IN RELATIVE CARE; 6.4 MILLION OF THESE CHILDREN RECEIVED NO OTHER NONPARENTAL CARE. OVER ONE-QUARTER OF CHILDREN UNDER AGE 3 WERE IN RELATIVE CARE ONLY, COMPARED WITH ABOUT ONE-FIFTH OF OLDER CHILDREN.



Table 1. Children under Age 13 Regularly in Relative Care While a Parent Works, by Age of Child (percent)

Age (years) ^a	Any Relative Care		Only Relative Care		Relative Care in Combination		Sample Size	
	1999	2002	1999	2002	1999	2002	1999	2002
Under 3	34.7	33.0	28.0	25.7	6.5	7.2	3,511	3,379
3 to 4	31.7	31.4	18.2	17.2	13.1	14.0	2,907	2,812
6 to 9	26.7	25.6	21.5	20.2	5.1	5.3	5,361	4,991
10 to 12	24.1	20.2 [∨]	20.9	16.7 [∨]	3.1	3.4	3,816	3,856

Sources: 1999 and 2002 National Survey of America's Families

Notes: "Any Relative Care" includes children in relative care as their only regular arrangement ("Only Relative Care") and children in relative care as part of a combination of arrangements ("Relative Care in Combination"). The sums of the Only Relative Care and Relative Care in Combination columns may not equal the percentage shown in the Any Relative Care column because of rounding.

^a Analysis excludes children age 5.

[∨] Decrease between 1999 and 2002 is significant at the 0.10 level.

importance for 3- and 4-year-olds who receive care exclusively from relatives. Child care and preschool settings in those early years play an important part in preparing children for school, and research suggests that informal arrangements, such as relative care, focus less on education than center-based child care does (Brown-Lyons, Robertson, and Layzer 2001).

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Endnotes

- ¹ "Parent" refers to the adult in the household identified as "most knowledgeable" about the child. Such adults, usually parents, were asked about child care arrangements used at least once a week in the past month and the number of hours spent in each arrangement. "Relative care" does not include either parent, even if the parents live in separate households.
- ² Children in the latter category may be in one or more additional nonparental arrangements, including center-based care, before- and after-school care, family child care, or nanny/babysitter care. Relative care may or may not be

Table 2. Children under Age 13 in Full-Time Relative Care, as Share of Children in Age Group with Any Relative Care

Age (years) ^a	1999	2002
Under 3	36.5	38.6
3 to 4	30.8	34.1
6 to 9	12.8	14.9
10 to 12	6.2	9.8

Sources: 1999 and 2002 National Survey of America's Families

Notes: Full-time means 35 or more hours of relative care a week. No differences between 1999 and 2002 are significant at the 0.10 level.

^a Analysis excludes children age 5.

the arrangement in which they spend the most hours. Because the NSAF asks only about regular child care arrangements, these data cannot be used to measure how many parents rely on relatives for occasional care.

- ³ Five-year-olds are not included because their child care arrangements differ significantly depending on whether they have started school. See Kathleen Snyder and Sarah Adelman, *The Use of Relative Care While Parents Work: Findings from the 1999 National Survey of America's Families* (Washington, D.C.: The Urban Institute, 2004), *Assessing the New Federalism* Discussion Paper 04-09.

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of America's Families



Snapshots III presents findings from the 1997, 1999, and 2002 rounds of the National Survey of America's Families (NSAF). Information on more than 100,000 people was gathered from approximately 40,000 representative households in each round. The NSAF is part of the *Assessing the New Federalism* project (ANF). Information on ANF and the NSAF can be obtained at <http://www.urban.org/anf>.

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