

## Project Brief: *Young and 'care-full':* The support needs of young kinship carers updated February 2016

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Kinship care as a protective response is growing rapidly across Australia and many other countries. It now provides a greater proportion of protective care (49%) in Australia than foster care (45%)(Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2015). In addition, in the UK and the USA it has been identified that around 95% of kinship carers are informal, that is, not associated with child protection intervention (Selwyn & Nandy, 2012; The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2012)<sup>1</sup>. Numbers of informal carers in Australia have not yet been formally identified.

Recent analysis of the 2001 UK Census produced the surprising information that there appears to be a large, hidden population of sibling kinship carers in the United Kingdom, that is, older sisters and brothers raising younger siblings as primary carers (Selwyn & Nandy, 2012). This group are largely providing informal care; with the exception of Northern Ireland, they appear little in the statutory kinship care cohort. Little is known about sibling kinship carers; however this study suggested that they are a particularly vulnerable population – predominantly young, single women on low incomes. The authors called for work in other Western countries to determine whether they have a similar cohort of hidden sibling kinship carers whose needs are not identified or met.

A recent small qualitative study by the Family Rights Group in London (Roth, Lindley, & Ashley, 2011) also indicated that sibling kinship carers are a vulnerable and often hidden group who often found services inappropriate to their needs. For these reasons and due to their youth, they may be less able than other kinship carers to access what assistance may be available.

There is no current information about how many sibling kinship carers there may be in Victoria, or across Australia. It is likely therefore that there may also be unidentified sibling kinship carers in Australia with unmet support needs. Some kinship care support services are aware of small numbers of sibling kinship carers within the statutory (child protection) population. Anecdotal evidence suggests that there are sibling kinship carers among refugee and asylum seeker populations.

Initial discussions with the Australian Bureau of Statistics has revealed that current census analysis techniques do not allow for an accurate picture of the number of sibling kinship carers in Victoria/Australia. Discussion is currently taking place about methods of analysis for the 2016 Australian Census that may allow for this. However, it is possible to determine the number of young related kinship carers of a specified age, for example, 30 years and under. It is possible that most of these young kinship carers may be siblings; however this cannot be determined until the next Census.

Attention in Australia to identifying young carers has focused on young people who have a caring role with older people or family members with disabilities (Social Policy Research Centre, 2011). Such research has revealed that these young carers experience significant disadvantage in relation to educational and employment opportunities, as well as a lack of needed social supports. There has as yet been no attention to the characteristics and support needs of young kinship carers.

An exploratory study is being conducted to identify the incidence and characteristics of young kinship carers in Victoria and/or Australia age 30 years or under including the number of young Indigenous kinship carers and children. This is being done in collaboration with the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare and involves census analysis, an internet survey and a small number of in-depth interviews. Project outcomes may include:

- Better understanding by State and Federal policymakers of issues about young kinship carers, including information that may help in developing policy about support to this group.
- Better support to young kinship carers and the children in their care.

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<sup>1</sup> These figures do not include non-familial kinship carers, ie 'family friends' or 'kith': people well-known to a child but not related as family.

## Aims

1. To identify young kinship carers in Victoria and/or Australia and explore their characteristics and support needs.
2. To determine the incidence of young kinship carers in Victoria and Australia using 2011 Census data.
3. To determine the proportions of young carer arrangements that pertain to Indigenous children and young Indigenous carers.
4. To identify opportunities to better support young kinship carers and children in their care.
5. To alert policymakers and community to this issue as appropriate to the findings.
6. To inform the development of more comprehensive research in this area in the future.

## Research questions

1. What is the incidence of young kinship carers (under age 26 and age 31) in Victoria/Australia?
2. What proportion of these young carers and children in their care are Indigenous?
3. What are the characteristics of young kinship carers in Victoria/Australia?
4. What are their support needs?
5. What support do they receive, and what, if any, unmet support needs do they have?

## Methodology

- Literature review
- Customised analysis of Australian census data from 2011.
- Interviews with key informants, young carers and young people age 18+ who have grown up the care of young kinship carers; focus groups with staff of kinship care and youth support services.
- Online and hard copy survey using Survey Monkey.
- Data analysis using Microsoft Excel (Survey) and NVivo (interviews).
- Exploration of feasibility of setting up a pilot online support service for young kinship carers.

## Staffing

The project is being undertaken by Meredith Kiraly, Research Fellow, working on a part-time basis in consultation with Professor Cathy Humphreys. Other staff may be involved as the project expands.

## Steering committee

The committee advises on the project's implementation and reporting. Members include a young person with relevant experience, and representatives of the Centre for Excellence in Child & Family Welfare, the Commission for Children & Young People, Oz Child, DHS, Kinship Care Victoria, the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency, Centre for Multicultural Youth and the Mirabel Foundation.

## Ethics approval

Human Research Ethics Committee (University of Melbourne), approved as project No.1341257.2.

## References

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