

Grandmothers at Work during Coronavirus

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At age 60, and in the midst of the Coronavirus pandemic, Nancy has just become a grandmother. Twice! She intended to help with the twins for a few weeks when they were first born and then return to her job as a substitute teacher. Unfortunately, due to the virus, the schools closed and her job disappeared. So she moved into a small house near her daughter to care for her granddaughters when her daughter and son-in-law returned to their jobs as doctors.

Now Nancy cares for the twins at all hours of the day, depending on when her daughter and son-in-law are scheduled to work. Nancy's husband is a doctor, and his clinic is closed due to the virus. Because their income has disappeared, Nancy's daughter is paying Nancy the amount she would be paying a professional child care provider. Nancy and her husband are self-isolating. They see no one but the family except during their weekly grocery store runs. However, Nancy's daughter and son-in-law are exposed to patients with COVID-19 daily. Although they are careful not to bring the virus home from the hospital, the risk is particularly high for Nancy's husband, who has had a quadruple bypass. Nancy's situation demonstrates many of the ways that COVID-19 is reshaping the lives of working grandmothers in the U.S.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- COVID-19 is reshaping the lives of working grandmothers in the U.S.
- Due to the health risks of COVID-19 for older adults, many families decided to isolate separately from grandparents.
- Many families are now without their primary or secondary source of childcare - grandmothers.
- In other cases, grandmothers are providing more childcare than ever.
- Job loss among older adults often means inability to provide essential financial support to children and grandchildren.

Grandmothering has Intensified in the U.S.

Prior to the pandemic, two key trends were already reshaping grandmothering in the U.S. First, grandmothering has been intensifying. Grandmothers are providing more help than they expect to provide and more help than their parents provided them.¹ Part of the reason grandparents in the U.S. provide more support than grandparents in many other countries is that the U.S. provides so little support to families and children. In countries where policies help young families juggle employment and parenting, grandparents provide less intensive childcare.² The U.S. does not guarantee paid vacation, paid sick time, paid parental leave, or high quality affordable daycare. Grandparents often pick up the slack.

At the same time that the need for assistance from grandmothers is increasing, so are the odds that grandmothers are employed. More mothers and grandmothers are working outside the home than ever. In 2017, 67% of married mothers and 73% of unmarried mothers worked outside the home.³ The average age at which women become grandmothers is 50, and increasingly, grandmothers are employed. In 2018, 71% of women ages 50-54, and 64% of women ages 55-59 were employed.⁴

In my book, [Grandmothers at Work](#), I studied working grandmothers who juggle employment and grandchild care. I found that among working women who have at least one grandchild, 46% provide at least some grandchild care. Some provide care intermittently, some weekly, and some provide around-the-clock care as custodial grandparents.

Grandmothers are often highly coveted sources of grandchild care because they tend to be more flexible, lower cost, and more reliable than paid childcare options.^{1,5} Working grandmothers often rearrange their work schedules to care for their grandchildren. They put grandchildren on the bus before work, meet their bus after school, take them to lessons or doctor appointments, and help with homework, bathing, feeding, and bedtime tuck in. They take grandchildren to work and they take work home to their grandchildren. Many working grandmothers use their paid vacation and paid sick days to care for their grandchildren on sick days, snow days, or school holidays.¹ Some change jobs, giving up steady incomes and generous fringe benefits for jobs with maximum flexibility so they can care for their grandchildren. Some move to new towns, giving up friends, volunteering, church, and other social networks to be near their grandchildren. Half of grandparents provide financial assistance, paying for everything from diapers and formula to therapies, scientific calculators, and tennis lessons.^{1,6}

I interviewed Marsha before the COVID-19 pandemic. When one of her twin grandsons was diagnosed with Down syndrome and the other with autism, Marsha and her husband moved to a new city and changed jobs so that they would be nearby to help. Now 64, Marsha has become a real estate agent because the hours are flexible, allowing her to care for her grandsons. She rearranges her schedule constantly to care for them days, evenings, and weekends. She and her husband take them to doctor and therapy appointments, look after them during sick or snow days, and pay for some of their therapies.¹ In addition to giving up benefits such as paid vacation and sick leave, employer-based health insurance, and private pensions, Marsha paid for training to become a licensed real estate agent. As a result, their incomes and their retirement nest eggs are much smaller than they expected. Before the pandemic, they both planned to work for another 10 years, until Marsha is 74. Now their incomes and stock market investments have likely shrunk further as the demand for real estate agents has plummeted due to stay at home orders. Marsha and her husband have the time and flexibility to care for their grandsons, but they now face unexpected financial hardships.

Working Grandmothers during Coronavirus

As the pandemic unfolds, it is redefining the roles of working grandmothers along two key dimensions. First, are grandmothers and grandchildren isolating together or apart? Second, who is able to work from home?

Challenges Related to Stay-at-Home Isolation

When families began to isolate at home, they had to make decisions about who is inside and who is outside of their social bubbles. Because the health risks of COVID-19 and the chances of having underlying conditions increase with age, many families decided to isolate separately from grandparents. As a result, some grandparents are suddenly providing much less care for their grandchildren. Indeed, millions of grandparents are aching for their grandchildren. Spending time with grandchildren is one of the greatest joys for many grandparents,⁶ and not being able to hug their grandchildren has proven difficult. Families have been clever about allowing the generations to mingle on opposite sides of glass windows or through apps such as Zoom or Facetime, but grandparents find these strategies to be a poor substitute for the hugging and holding that usually dominates their interactions with their grandchildren.

Another challenge is that families who have isolated separately from grandparents are now without their primary or secondary sources of childcare. Nearly half of children under age five receive some childcare

from grandparents.⁷ But now many parents and children are working from and learning at home. Parents are attempting to juggle work meetings and playing with dolls or teaching geometry to their children who they are now responsible for homeschooling. Grandparents may be ready and able to care for grandchildren but cannot because they are isolating separately.

Conversely, if they are living in the same households or are isolating in the same social bubble, grandmothers may be providing more care than ever for their grandchildren. Families who have deemed that the health risks are sufficiently low, or that their childcare needs are too great, may be relying on grandmothers more than ever. Some grandmothers are happy to be making these contributions while others feel they have little choice.

Not Everyone has the Benefit of Working from Home

Grandmother roles are also being redefined by who can, and who cannot, work from home. Generally, those with less education and lower incomes, blacks, Hispanics, and immigrants are less likely to be able to work from home.⁸ They are also less likely to be able to afford paid childcare and more likely to rely on grandmothers for free, flexible child care. In some families, adult children are essential workers in health care, food services, retail, or other sectors. They are not permitted to work from home and have few childcare alternatives. Many rely heavily on grandparents. But the health risks are high: as front line workers, they are more likely to bring the virus home to children and grandparents.

Grandmothers are often able to work from home but usually do so while the children are at school. Now that the grandchildren are homeschooling, grandmothers are increasingly likely to be balancing video meetings with finger painting and algebra lessons. Rose, age 54, now works from home some days because of coronavirus. She readily handles human resources issues but occasionally has to interrupt herself to tell her granddaughter which math assignment to work on next.

In other families, grandparents are not able to work from home either because they are essential front line workers or because they have lost their jobs during the pandemic. We learned during the Great Recession that middle-aged and older workers were laid off at higher rates and were slower to regain employment when the economy recovered. We expect to see the same pattern with this economic downturn.⁹

I interviewed Jamaica before the pandemic. At 49, she has a household income of less than \$30,000, yet provides childcare and financial help for her three grandchildren. Money was already tight before the pandemic. She was walking to her housecleaning jobs because she did not have enough money to fix her car, had not been to the doctor in eight years, and had lost a tooth because she could not afford to go to the dentist. Now she is facing what nearly all housecleaners are facing: customers are canceling housekeepers for fear they might bring the virus in with them.¹⁰ The loss of income will reverberate through all three generations of the family.

A Call for Policies to Reduce the Intensification of Grandmothering

The intensification of grandmothering is linked to the lack of U.S. government guarantees for paid vacation, paid sick time, paid parental leave, and high quality, affordable daycare.^{1,2} Some employees have access to these benefits through their jobs, but employers are more likely to offer these benefits to their higher-paid and full-time employees.¹¹ To reduce burdens on grandparents, we need to implement policies that help young families juggle work and children.

Paid Vacation Leave

Worldwide, 127 countries guarantee paid vacation to workers. The U.S. does not.^{11,12} Although over 90% of full-time workers receive paid vacation benefits through their employers, only 40% of part-time workers receive paid vacation days.¹² Low-income workers are the least likely to receive paid vacation leave.¹²

Paid Sick Leave

The U.S. is the only developed country that does not guarantee workers paid sick leave.¹² Like vacation leave, low-income workers are far less likely than their higher earning peers to receive paid sick leave. Only 26% of workers in the bottom income quintile receive paid sick leave compared to 75% of workers in the top income quintile.¹¹ Part-time workers are 50% less likely than those working full time to have access to paid sick leave.¹³

Paid Parental Leave

The U.S. also fails when it comes to paid parental leave. Worldwide, 180 countries mandate paid maternity leave, and 81 mandate paid paternity leave, but the U.S. mandates neither.¹⁴ As a result, only 17% of U.S. workers have access to paid family leave.⁸ Although unpaid leave is guaranteed through the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA), to be eligible employees must have worked with the company for 12 months, worked at least 1,250 hours during the preceding 12 months, and worked for an employer with at least 50 employees within a 75-mile radius.^{14,16} Even when workers qualify for the program, many cannot afford to take advantage because they cannot afford to go without pay.¹¹

Affordable Quality Daycare

The lack of affordable quality daycare options also puts tremendous stress on young families. Among parents with a child under the age of five, 83% report that finding quality, affordable childcare is a serious problem in their area.¹⁵ The U.S. does offer childcare support to some middle- and low-income families through tax subsidies, tax credits, and subsidized childcare, but access can be challenging. Of the low-income families eligible for subsidized childcare, only 15% actually receive it due to long waiting lists and insufficient funds.¹⁵

In the absence of federal guarantees for paid vacation, sick days, parental leave, and affordable high quality child care, U.S. families turn to grandparents in general, and grandmothers specifically, for increasingly high levels of grandchild care. While there are numerous benefits of grandchild care for all three generations,¹ the precarity and challenges of such a system are increasingly visible during the coronavirus pandemic. Implementing federal guarantees that are provided in most other countries, but are currently not provided in the U.S., would strengthen these care work relationships and help to strengthen U.S. families overall.

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