

Article

In Loco Parentis: Informal Kinship Care in Australia—Social Benefit and Material Poverty

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Abstract: Informal kinship care families in Australia are a large, hidden population. This article provides an overview of international research and policy developments regarding informal kinship care and considers their relevance to Australia. The benefit to children is identified along with the severe economic burden of care falling on caregiving families. Australian Federal and State policy settings are described in relation to the recognition and support of informal kinship care families, and an overwhelming need for better financial and social support is identified. Ways forward to improve the circumstances of these families are considered, together with areas for future research.

Keywords: kinship care; relative care; grandparents raising grandchildren; child poverty; social justice

1. Introduction

Kinship care is defined as ‘family-based care within the child’s extended family or with close friends of the family known to the child, whether formal or informal in nature’ [1]. Such care has existed across time and societies, with varying levels of societal support. Australia’s response to kinship care is influenced by its nature as a Federation of six States and two Territories: New South Wales (NSW), Queensland, Victoria, South Australia (SA), Western Australia (WA), Tasmania, the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) and the Northern Territory (NT). There is a division of responsibilities between the Commonwealth (Federal Government) and State/Territory governments, some boundaries being clearer than others. Child protection, including statutory (formal) kinship care, is the domain of the States and Territories. Family support is largely a Commonwealth responsibility and includes financial and social programs for individuals and families identified as vulnerable, whether temporarily or longer term. This article explores the under-researched area of informal kinship care in Australia.

1.1. Formal Kinship Care—A Dominant Narrative

Kinship care has come to prominence in recent decades in high-income countries as a new approach to the protective care of children subject to neglect or abuse, known as formal kinship care or statutory kinship care. Care by ‘close friends of the family’ (non-familial kinship care) is variously interpreted to include people known via community connections. Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (Indigenous) communities extend Western notions of family to include people accepted as being related to a child such as members of their community, a compatible community, or the same language group. Non-Indigenous people may be adopted into Indigenous families by custom. In this article, the term ‘foster care’ is used exclusively to denote non-relative foster care as opposed to kinship care.

The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) collects data from the States and Territories on a range of social issues. The term ‘relatives/kinship care’ was first seen in their annual *Child Protection* reports in 1998 [2], where it was identified as a new type of out-of-home care distinguished from informal kinship care by the payment of a care allowance. The proportion of children recorded as in formal kinship care has increased over time, with 54% of all children in out-of-home care in 2022 being in kinship care [3].



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Indigenous children are 12 times more likely to be in out-of-home care than non-Indigenous children [3]. A key concern for Aboriginal communities is the frequency with which Aboriginal children are placed in non-Aboriginal protective care arrangements designated as kinship care that are not consistent with Aboriginal understandings of kin, and the attendant risk of children's alienation from family and culture [4].

Both international and Australian kinship care research have focused largely on formal kinship care or used mixed samples of informal and formal kinship carers, usually without identifying the separate cohorts. The capacity to attract research funding to informal kinship care specifically is limited compared with formal (statutory) care, about which institutional stakeholders have an interest in obtaining an evidence base. Formal kinship care, however, constitutes a very small proportion of all kinship care arrangements as seen below.

1.2. Informal Kinship Care

Informal kinship care arrangements are agreements made between parents and their relatives or friends without statutory involvement. In Australia, these include care arrangements decided in the Federal Family Court or Federal Magistrates Court (as opposed to State/Territory child protection authorities) and therefore not eligible for care allowances. In Queensland, the Torres Strait Islander practice of Cultural Adoption—the voluntary, permanent transfer of care responsibilities within a child's cultural group—is now enshrined in law via Cultural Recognition Orders as a unique voluntary arrangement [5].

As observed in the UK and the US [6,7], decision making about statutory formalisation of kinship care as protective care is not always obvious. While access to foster care placements necessitates formalisation of care, child protection authorities can play a brief role in a child's move to the care of a relative or friend without formalisation, the change in domicile being deemed to have dealt with the evident risk, thus obviating any need for further statutory intervention. In the US, the term 'kinship diversion' has been used to describe such interventions and is the source of some controversy, not least because financial support is dependent on formalisation of care [7]. In high-income countries, the reasons for children moving to alternative care are largely similar across both informal and formal kinship care arrangements, that is, parental incapacity associated with substance misuse, mental illness, and family violence [8,9]. The nexus between statutory care status and financial support is thus a central—perhaps the predominant—issue for the wellbeing of children in informal kinship care and that of their carers.

1.3. Prevalence of Children Living in Kinship Care

The vast majority of children in kinship care are in informal care arrangements. Through analysis of 2001 British census data, Selwyn and Nandy [10] identified approximately 143,400 children in relative kinship care in England (1.3% of English children), a figure that, however, excluded non-familial kinship care. Around 95% of these children were estimated to be in informal kinship care. In the US, The Annie E Casey Foundation [11] reported that in 2020–2022, extended family members and close family friends were caring for 2,529,000 children (3% of US children), again identifying over 95% with informal care arrangements.

Due to technical issues, an Australian study using 2011 census data chose *households* rather than *children* as the unit for analysis, identifying around 58,000 two-generational kinship care families, which did not however include an unknown number of multigenerational kinship care families [12]. Over 82% of the two-generational kinship care families appeared to have informal care arrangements. With surveys of kinship carers reporting an average of approximately 1.5 children per kinship care household [13] and an unknown additional number of children in multigenerational households, it is thus likely that there were well over 100,000 children in informal kinship care in 2011. The number of children in informal kinship care in Australia therefore vastly exceeded the approximately

38,000 children in all types of protective out-of-home care (formal kinship care, foster care and residential care) at that time [14].

The census data studies have also challenged a prevailing belief that kinship care is overwhelmingly provided by grandparents. Selwyn and Nandy [10] estimated that 44% of children in relative kinship care in England were living with grandparents. In the US, Denby and Ayala [15] found that 54% of children living away from their biological parents were with their grandparents, 21% with other relatives, and 24% with non-relatives. The Australian study analysed census data by carer's age rather than the carer-child relationship, again for technical reasons [12]. In total, 26% of the kinship care households were found to involve a carer aged 60 years or more; 53% had a carer aged 31–59 years; and 20% a carer aged 30 years or less. These Australian data thus also lean towards a more mixed picture of carer-child relationships than a grandparent-dominated one.

2. Literature Review

Systematic reviews of the kinship care literature have consistently reported positive benefits of kinship care for children, including in relation to safety, permanency and wellbeing [16–18].

Informal kinship care was the subject of a specific review of international research by MacDonald, Hayes, and Houston [19]. The authors identified 57 papers published up to 2014 that either addressed informal kinship care exclusively or presented disaggregated findings about informal and formal kinship care within mixed studies. Most studies were conducted in the US or in the UK; they included two very large studies, one in the US [20] and the other in the UK [21]. Poverty was reported as a major issue.

Financial assistance to alleviate poverty was identified across most studies as the inextinguishable priority for supporting informal kinship placements.

[19] (p. 81)

Many of the carers in employment were reported to be on very low incomes, and poverty was compounded by the additional costs of meeting the children's needs. Unsurprisingly, the comparative studies noted that financial difficulties were more pronounced for informal kinship care families than for formal care families.

The studies reviewed also identified multiple adversities for children in informal kinship care, including emotional and behavioural difficulties as a consequence of trauma. Grandparent carers reported age-related issues of physical and mental ill health and disabilities, and a number of grandparents experienced social isolation from their peers. Some children expressed anxiety about the possibility of their grandparents dying. Some studies reported carers having a sense of legal vulnerability about the security of their care arrangements, and a lack of authority to give consent for children's medical care and educational activities. Children's contact with their parents was seen to be associated with many difficulties. The research of Hunt and Waterhouse [8] was again noted as asserting that the social circumstances and childhood experiences of children in informal kinship care in the UK were similar to those in formal kinship care. Carers in some studies were reported as viewing the provision of care informally as desirable to avoid intrusive bureaucratic processes, but also as limiting access to support; and the desirability of community-based support initiatives independent of child protection was mentioned.

Despite the hardships identified, many positive aspects to care were reported by both children and carers in these studies, with children frequently reporting being happy with their living arrangements, feeling safe and well cared for, and carers commenting on the enrichment of their lives through close relationships with the children.

Koh, Daugherty, and Ware [22] noted many similar findings among papers about informal kinship care published after the studies reviewed by MacDonald et al. Koh et al.'s own US study of informal kinship carers' experiences of parenting again reported the positive benefit to carers of close bonds with the children in their care, but also the considerable burden of care, including children's behavioural challenges. Once again,

financial hardship was the issue most frequently mentioned. The authors noted that US services and programs for informal kinship care families were still very limited despite new Federal legislation at that time providing for improved kinship services, and commented that many US States appeared not to be utilising the available Federal support.

Australian Research

The only Australian research identified that included a specific cohort of informal kinship carers was a large study by Harnett, Dawe, and Russell [23] that compared the circumstances of carers and children in informal grandparent care with those in foster care in Queensland¹. Children in grandparent care were reported to be displaying better behavioural and adaptive functioning than children in foster care; however, the grandparent carers reported higher levels of distress in relation to the carer role than the foster carers. The researchers noted the lack of both financial and non-financial support to the grandparent carers as a possible variable in relation to some differences identified.

Three other large research projects included surveys of both informal and formal kinship carers. Yardley et al. [9] targeted kinship carers in New South Wales; Brennan et al. [24] surveyed grandparent carers Australia-wide; and Wanslea [25] surveyed Western Australian grandparent carers. In total, 77% in the Wanslea [25] study was informal, and in the Brennan et al. study 73% of carers would have been regarded as informal had those with Federal Family Law orders not been excluded from the informal count. Despite the joy many carers derived from the children, all three surveys echoed the overwhelming finding of the international literature that poverty was the biggest problem for the carers.

The major challenge is financial. It is a continual battle to make ends meet.

[24] (p. 97)

I have no other problems with my grandchildren, I love them dearly and they bring me so much joy, but I need money.

[24] (p. 97)

Despite the over-representation of Aboriginal children in kinship care and its distinct differences from non-Indigenous care, there have been few published studies specifically addressing Aboriginal kinship care, and those few have also generally involved aggregate formal and informal care groups (see for example [25–27]). These studies have identified similar challenges to those of non-Indigenous kinship care families, however, often experienced to an even greater extent. They note particular issues for carers in trusting and engaging with available services due to historical adverse experiences with authorities. Each study noted the paramount importance of continuity of cultural and kinship knowledge for the children.

The overriding themes in the literature about informal kinship care are thus the social benefit to children and the burden on caregiving families, particularly financial, despite many carers' positive experiences of their relationships with the children.

3. Informal Kinship Care and Governance in Australia

Despite their numbers, informal kinship care families are largely hidden within the Australian polity. Discrimination and fragmentation are seen across the different types of kinship care arrangements, and between kinship carers and other types of carers. Several aspects of governance are pivotal to generating blind spots with regard to the existence, vulnerability and need for assistance of informal kinship care families.

3.1. Census of Population and Housing

'If you can't measure it, you can't improve it' ([28], quoting Peter Drucker). As seen above, it is not currently possible to derive an accurate figure for the number of children in informal kinship care, or their various relationships to their carers, due to technical issues with Australian census data [12]. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) was made aware of these issues by several parties engaged in social planning through the Census Topic

Review of 2018. However, while prioritising the redevelopment of family relationships data, change was not able to be implemented for the 2021 census. The Census Topic Review of 2023 revisited this topic, and at the time of writing it appeared that census questions related to family relationships might progress to testing for the 2026 census [29].

3.2. *The Federated System of Government*

The division of responsibilities between Federal and State/Territory governments contributes to the invisibility of informal kinship care families. Children moving to live with relatives or ‘family friends’ without formalisation of care become, or remain, invisible to State and Territory child protection authorities; they and their carers also lack avenues for recognition by the Commonwealth. Some limited recognition has, however, been brought to bear on grandparent carers, largely due to lobbying by groups such as the Australian Council on the Ageing (COTA); and two projects exploring the needs of informal and formal grandparent carers [30,31] were instigated by government Ministers. The *Inquiry into Grandparents who take primary responsibility for raising their grandchildren* (‘Inquiry into Grandparent Care’) [32] produced a report with detailed recommendations to improve the circumstances of these families; however, few of the recommendations were actually implemented. Another 2015 Senate Inquiry, the *Inquiry into Out-of-home Care* [33] also paid some attention to kinship care and made a series of recommendations about kinship care, some of which included informal kinship care. Notably, Recommendation 34 included the establishment of a national peak body for relative/kinship carers. Again, however, none of the recommendations that related to kinship care have been implemented.

The *Parliamentary Friends of Grandparent and Kinship Carers* [34] is a special interest group of Members of Parliament that provides a forum to meet with kinship carers on matters of concern. While significant improvement in legislation or policy to support kinship carers has not been seen in earlier years, some progress may be imminent. In 2023, this Friends group amended their name from *Parliamentary Friends of Grandparent Carers* to *Parliamentary Friends of Grandparent and Kinship Carers* to be more inclusive, and received a deputation of kinship carers from five States and the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) who presented a series of requests for legislative and policy development. Further engagement between the Friends and this kinship carer group is anticipated in 2024.

3.3. *Carer Recognition Acts*

A striking example of the invisibility of kinship care is seen in legislation to recognise ‘Carers’² which exists at both Federal level and in each Australian State and Territory (e.g., [35,36]). In the Federal legislation [35], a Carer is defined in the following way:

A Carer is an individual who provides personal care, support and assistance to another individual who needs it because that other individual has a disability; or has a medical condition (including a terminal or chronic illness); or has a mental illness; or is frail and aged.

State and Territory Carer Recognition Acts have adopted similar definitions to the Federal Act, with ad hoc amendments in recent years in some jurisdictions to include *some* kinship carers. Queensland includes grandparent carers (both informal and formal), but not other kinship carers [37]. Tasmania includes informal kinship carers but not formal kinship carers [38]. Oddly, since the definition of a Carer relates to ‘unpaid’ carers, legislation in Victoria and the ACT includes formal kinship carers and excludes informal kinship carers. The lack of recognition of informal kinship carers in legislation excludes them from services to Carers such as respite care, casework and counselling, and particular supports for Young Carers such as educational bursaries.

In 2023, the (Federal) *Parliamentary Inquiry into the recognition of unpaid carers* received submissions regarding the exclusion of kinship carers from the Federal Act, and the inconsistency of the Federal Act with the various State and Territory Carer Recognition Acts. At the time of writing, the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Social Policy and Legal Affairs was reviewing submissions and developing recommendations regarding

improved recognition for ‘unpaid carers’ at a Federal level. Advocacy by kinship care groups continues for amendments to legislation in various State and Territory jurisdictions.

3.4. Federal Government Benefits

The Commonwealth of Australia provides a range of financial benefits for the unemployed, people with chronic illness or disabilities, parents, children, and Carers, as currently defined [39]. There is little focus on support for children in informal kinship care or their carers. McHugh and Valentine [40] noted that access to Commonwealth income support payments for which kinship and foster carers may be eligible appeared to be reliant on their ability to find information on their rights and entitlements. Anomalies in entitlements abound. Modest progress was made in 2022 when the *Grandparent Advisor* program was renamed the *Grandparent, Foster and Kinship Carer Advisor* program to reflect a wider remit, but to date, a more inclusive focus has not been extended to the *Additional Child Care Subsidy (Grandparent)*. The *Foster Child Health Care Card* provides access to subsidised medical care and is actually available for all children in informal and formal kinship care as well as foster care, but its name provides little indication of this, thereby excluding those who fail to examine the ‘fine print’. The *Double Orphan Pension* is a small benefit available to children where both parents are dead, or one parent is dead and one is missing or in long-term care or incarceration, excluding other children with similar levels of parental unavailability. The name *Double Orphan Pension* is itself misleading and self-evidently inappropriate to the contemporary era, and there has been no real improvement in this pension’s rates since its inception in the 1970s. *Parental Leave Pay* is not automatically extended to kinship carers, and in any case the rate of this benefit is lower than employed kinship carers might receive if legislation included them specifically in industrial entitlements to parental leave.

A lack of evidence of kinship carers’ status as in loco parentis leads to many informal kinship carers experiencing difficulty in obtaining official documents such as children’s birth certificates and Medicare cards, and authorising consent for medical treatment and school or sports activities. Recommendation 17 of the 2014 *Inquiry into Grandparent Care* was to establish a Commonwealth Informal Relative Caregiver Statutory Declaration (however, still not necessarily acknowledging non-familial kinship carers), and remains unimplemented.

3.5. State and Territory Programs

Organisations running support groups for kinship carers exist in most States and Territories. Most focus on grandparent carers with other kinship carers sometimes included as ‘add-ons’. There are also small State-funded telephone information services and support groups specifically for informal kinship carers attached to larger community organisations in Queensland, Victoria, and a pilot one in one region of Tasmania. Community service organisation Wanslea in Western Australia operates the *Grandcare* support program for informal grandparent carers, and a major research project commissioned by Wanslea ([41], mentioned above) was influential in the decision of the WA government to increase their annual allowance for informal grandparent carers to AUD 1000 [42]—nonetheless, a fraction of what is paid to formal kinship carers. Victoria is the only State with a small, dedicated representative kinship care organisation, Kinship Carers Victoria [43], whose mandate is to represent both formal and informal kinship carers. As a State organisation, KCV is, however, inevitably much taken up with statutory kinship care issues, and its coexistence with *Grandparents Victoria* also contributes to its support groups being grandparent-focused.

The small South Australian organisation Grandcarers SA [44] is the only stand-alone support and advocacy service for informal grandparent and other kinship carers. As of 2023, Grandcarers SA is looking to provide a platform for a national initiative to promote the interests of informal kinship care families with the Federal Government (see below).

There are also at least two kinship carer-led advocacy groups operating without core funding. Established in 1998, Grandparents Raising Grandchildren WA [45] is fully led and managed by volunteer grandparents. Kin Raising Kids [46] was established in 2017 to

lobby governments for better support, and advocated successfully for a State government review of informal kinship care [47]. The review recommended (among other things) to establish a pilot Informal Kinship Care Support and Liaison Service; to rename and expand the eligibility and coverage of the *Grandchildren Living with Grandparents* Program; and for the Tasmanian government to continue advocacy with the Commonwealth Government for implementation of key recommendations of the Federal 2014 *Inquiry into Grandparent Care*. All the recommendations of the Informal Kinship Care Review were accepted by the Tasmanian government. KRK was also pivotal in the inclusion of informal kinship carers in the *Tasmania Carer Recognition Act 2023* [38]. Following the passage of this Act, the Tasmanian Government formed the Ministers Carers Advisory Council, one member of which is an informal kinship carer, and has engaged Carers Tasmania to conduct research into the experience and needs of informal kinship carers to inform a new Carers Action Plan.

As seen with the various Carer Recognition Acts, the landscape of State and Territory support for informal kinship care families is thus self-evidently partial and piecemeal. It would appear unlikely that the State and Territory governments will ever be in a position to provide substantial support to informal kinship care families due to their mandate to prioritise children under formal child protection orders. A national focus is needed (see below).

4. Informal Kinship Care, Poverty, and Social Justice—International Developments

Given that the research overwhelmingly points to poverty as the major concern for informal kinship care families and that poverty affects life chances independently of other circumstances [48], the lack of attention to those families in most financial stress presents as an egregious example of distributive injustice. The nexus between formalisation of care and entitlement to both financial and non-financial support has unintentionally created a two-track system for children in kinship care, with one group supported both financially and with social services, and much larger groups where children from similar backgrounds are living in poverty without any dedicated support. This issue was raised in the US as early as 1999 [49]. In 2003, US researcher Geen [50] (p. 254) articulated the key issue for the wellbeing of kinship care families as a mismatch of needs and service response:

Part of the solution to designing a public policy approach to kinship care is understanding why kin are caring for children, the needs kin have as a result, and how best to meet those needs. . . . An effective kinship care policy would better match kin needs with public support and match state intrusion and oversights with safety concerns. . . . Children in kinship care, whether informal or formal, clearly need access to health and social services to address the consequences of traumatic pasts such as specialised casework support, family counselling, mediation, therapeutic care and supervision and support for parental contact visits as needed.

Ten years later, this issue was again being raised with some vigour in both the US and the UK.

'We have to ask ourselves if the families have similar needs, why shouldn't they receive the same amount of money as licensed foster parents to meet those needs?' . . . Diversion without support isn't good for families. . . .

[7] (p. 13)

In their research report *The Poor Relations*, British researchers Selwyn et al. [21] (p. 79) commented:

At present whether kinship carers receive help in cash or kind in the UK is not related to children's needs or to the financial situation of the carers. Whole system change is needed to replace the current unjust arrangements for kinship care. . . . A national kinship financial allowance is required which is funded by central government to cover the costs of bringing up the children.

And the British report 'It's Just Not Fair! Support, need and legal status in family and friends care' [51] (p. 177) made the following recommendation:

Equalise the allowances available to carers looking after children who would otherwise be in the care system, whether they are caring informally [or] under [specific British orders] and align them with the basic fostering rate.

Another 10 years later, the UK appears to be on the way to a better deal for children in kinship care. The UK organisation *Kinship* (formerly *Grandparents Plus*) has a track record of providing support and advocacy for kinship care families, utilising the results large surveys of kinship carers (e.g., [52]) in their lobbying to government. On the back of their representations to the UK Care Review [53], *Kinship* has launched a campaign #*ValueOurLove* for financial allowances and employment leave for kinship carers, again noting that the UK two-tiered system of national and local government generates complexity in implementation of benefits. The UK government subsequently agreed to deliver a new kinship care strategy by the end of 2023, together with a substantial national programme of tailored support and training for kinship carers [54].

New Zealand (NZ) is a country with a unique experience of achieving financial support for children in kinship care based on need rather than legal status. Like *Kinship* in the UK, *Grandparents Raising Grandchildren NZ* [55] is a support and advocacy organisation for kinship carers that conducts periodic large surveys of grandparent carers [56–58]. Identifying from the 2009 survey that children in informal kinship care had the same backgrounds and needs as those in formal kinship care, GRG argued to the NZ government that informal and formal kinship care families should be supported equitably. As a result, in 2009, the NZ Orphans Benefit and Unsupported Child's Benefit weekly rates were raised to parity with the national foster care allowance, and additional financial support has become available to these non-statutory carers over subsequent years. GRG is represented on the NZ Minister for Children's *Subject Matter Expert Advisory Group*, which in 2023 is focused on the reform of system settings and legislation to ensure that all children in care receive both the financial and non-financial support they need.

A wider movement to share kinship care expertise internationally is the forthcoming (2023) *Global Guidance on Kinship Care* that has been synthesised from surveys of best practice in 25 countries by Family for Every Child [59], an international research and advocacy alliance.

5. Whither Informal Kinship Care in Australia?

5.1. Bringing World Developments to Australia

The connected world provides opportunities to build on achievements elsewhere in the world to establish better recognition and support for informal kinship care families in Australia. Two national forums hosted by peak child and family welfare bodies in New South Wales and Queensland have sought to leverage the experience and achievements of *Kinship* in the UK, and GRG in New Zealand. A National Speaking Tour by the Chief Executive Officer of *Kinship* (then *Grandparents Plus*) was a component of a 2018 project entitled *Kinship Care—Making it a National Issue* commissioned by the NSW Association of Children's Welfare Agencies (ACWA) [60]. The project included a National Kinship Care Forum hosted by the National Children's Commissioner at the Australian Human Rights Commission, which identified priorities for kinship care policy and program development. Unfortunately, advocacy to pursue these priorities was not possible within the resources of ACWA given its State-based priorities.

In 2021, the Queensland peak body PeakCare [61] hosted the first-ever Forum devoted exclusively to informal kinship care on a national level, enthusiastically entitled '*Queensland Kinship Care Forum IV—What INFORMAL Kinship Carers need, what they really really need!*' It was held virtually due to the COVID-19 lockdowns of that time, serendipitously increasing access for participants across Australia and allowing for remote presentations by *Kinship* (UK) and GRG (NZ) about their support and advocacy work. Following the forum, an advocacy program to promote national recognition and support for informal kinship carers

was planned. Once again, however, the imperative of a State-based organisation to prioritise compelling State priorities eventually rendered this initiative unfeasible.

The frustration of the best intentions of both these State peak bodies makes transparently clear that a national advocacy approach for recognition of informal kinship care families will only be possible with dedicated resources rather than the goodwill of organisations with priorities in other areas. As noted above, Recommendation 34 of the 2015 *Inquiry into Out-of-home Care* included the establishment of a national kinship care organisation. In 2023, Grandcarers SA (South Australia) committed to providing a platform to build a national network of informal kinship care advocacy groups, with the long-term aim of securing funding to establish a national kinship care organisation for sustained advocacy for support to all kinship care families based upon need rather than legal status.

5.2. Implications for Social Policy and Practice in Australia

With evidence pointing to informal kinship care families having similar needs to families providing formal kinship care, similar levels of social and financial support should be available to all who need it. Like many countries, the Australian government is under significant fiscal pressure following costly responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. While the New Zealand model of financial support presents as a gold standard, it may be most realistic at this time to seek incremental steps toward equalising support for the care of vulnerable children. Financial benefits available to children deemed to be 'orphans' need to be openly extended to all children with similar parental unavailability, as well as the health care subsidies available to foster children. Child care fee relief available to children in grandparent care should be extended to children in informal kinship care regardless of the particular carer-child relationship. The parental role of kinship carers needs recognition in parental leave entitlements.

While financial stress is the critical issue for informal kinship carers, it is not the only difficulty they face. Myriad pressures of care include health difficulties for the large cohort of grandparent carers; challenging behaviours of traumatised children; children's disabilities and developmental delays; intrafamilial conflict and difficult parental contact visits; mental health issues for both children and carers; social isolation of carers; and the insecurity of care without formal legal arrangements. Recognition of kinship carers as Carers in legislation is an important first step, opening access to Carer-specific services and support. Carers need official documentation of their *in loco parentis* role to authorise children's medical care and educational activities. In the longer term, informal kinship care families need access to specialised community-based kinship care support services that include family counselling, contact centres, support groups, and legal advice.

5.3. Suggestions for Future Research

Further research about informal kinship care is needed to provide a solid evidence base for advocacy and service development. A primary task for research in Australia is to gain an accurate picture of the prevalence of children in kinship care, what percentage are in informal care arrangements, and the percentages of the various carer-child relationships. Current work by the Australian Bureau of Statistics to improve census data about family and carer relationships may allow for such research in the foreseeable future.

Qualitative research has to date focused largely on grandparent care. The lived experience of children and carers in informal kinship care across the range of carer-child relationships needs more attention. The experience of children's parents as they struggle with their own issues and the loss of their children's care is another under-researched area. In attending to these research gaps, researchers will need to confront the challenge of recruiting subjects from hidden and marginalised populations rather than via the reader access to formal kinship carers through official records, and grandparents via grandparent-focused support services.

In recent years, the Australian Research Council [62] has been the source of most large research grants for social research, including the studies by Yardley et al. [9], Harnett

et al. [23] and Brennan et al. [24] described above. Advocacy to raise public awareness about the existence and precarious circumstances of informal kinship care families stands to help with securing funding to research this less visible group of vulnerable families. In turn, research with this hidden population, while challenging, will provide a stronger basis for efforts to address their compelling need for support.

6. Conclusions

Australian research to date supports findings elsewhere in the world that informal kinship care families are a large, unrecognised group whose overwhelming issues are poverty and a lack of support, both financial and social. The research also points to the benefit to children of such care, despite the burden that accrues to the caregiving families. Work is now needed to extend the evidence base and harness it to raise awareness of these vulnerable children whose life opportunities could be so much improved with support based on need rather than legal status. Continuing advocacy is required for recognition and support for these generous families who have voluntarily taken children without parental care into their homes.

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Notes

- ¹ Formal kinship care was not yet a significant component of the out-of-home care system in Queensland in the years of the Harnett et al. [23] study.
- ² ‘Carer’ is here capitalized to avoid confusion with the use of ‘carer’ in the specific term ‘kinship carer’.

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