



**THE ECONOMIC WELL-BEING OF KIN AND NON-KIN CAREGIVERS:
COMPARING FINANCIAL RESOURCES, PAYMENT LEVELS, AND SERVICE SUPPORTS
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
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Introduction:

Until recently, California was one of only two states in the nation (Oregon being the other) where children in license-approved kinship foster care who were Title IV-E ineligible were *not* offered a foster care subsidy. Instead, these caregivers were directed to apply on behalf of the children in their care to the TANF program for income support, if needed. In July 2014, Governor Jerry Brown established the Approved Relative Care Funding Option program (ARC), allowing counties that elected to opt-in to offer full foster care subsidies to relative caregivers previously ineligible for such payments. Over three-quarters of California counties elected to participate and in 2015 began to develop strategies for outreach to kin caregivers to offer these additional financial supports.

What were the similarities and differences between kin and non-kin caregivers in California prior to the implementation of the ARC? In 2014, it was unknown what proportion of kin were and were not receiving full foster care subsidies, and whether there were any systematic differences in the characteristics of those denied full subsidies. Little was also known about the general characteristics of kin and non-kin caregivers in California and whether some of the notable differences in socioeconomic well-being, services, and supports – found in other studies over many years (Barth et al., 1998; Berrick, et al., 1994; Chipungu & Everett, 1994; Cook & Ciarico, 1998 as cited in Geen, 2003; Fox, Berrick, & Frasch, 2000; Sakai et al., 2011; U.S. Census, 2011) – had converged with time.

The purpose of the present study was to examine the economic well-being of kin and non-kin caregivers in select California counties prior to the implementation of the ARC, to understand caregiver characteristics and the characteristics of the children in their care. The study also included a follow up with caregivers who had indicated at initial contact that they were receiving no funding or TANF funding for the care of their child. We anticipated that some or all of these caregivers would be folded into the ARC over the study period and receive the higher payment rate.

What have we found?

I) Finances:

A) Financial supports:

The vast majority of non-kin caregivers received a foster care subsidy for the child in their care (small exceptions were found among caregivers who only served a child for a matter of a few weeks) compared to about two-thirds of kin. The remaining kin received a TANF (welfare) grant or no financial support for

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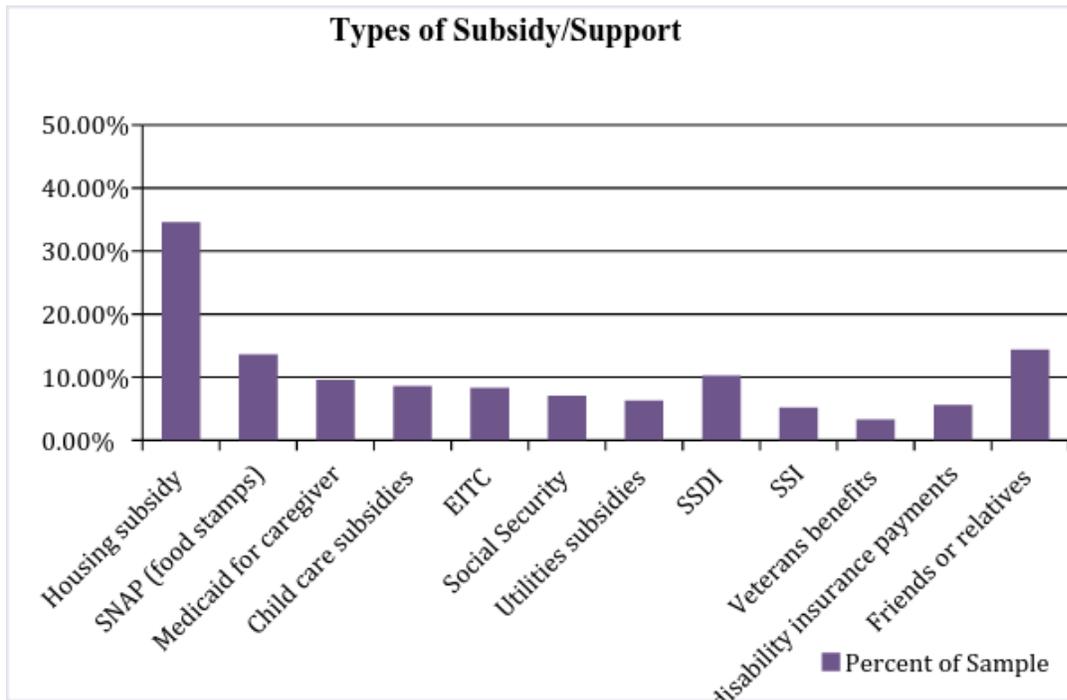
their care.

The average difference in monthly payment amounts between kin and non-kin was approximately \$200.

Following the early months of implementation of the ARC, about half of the kin who previously indicated a TANF payment or no payment were receiving a foster care subsidy; others' financial circumstances were unchanged.

Kin and non-kin caregivers' reliance on other public aid and assistance from friends and family was roughly similar.

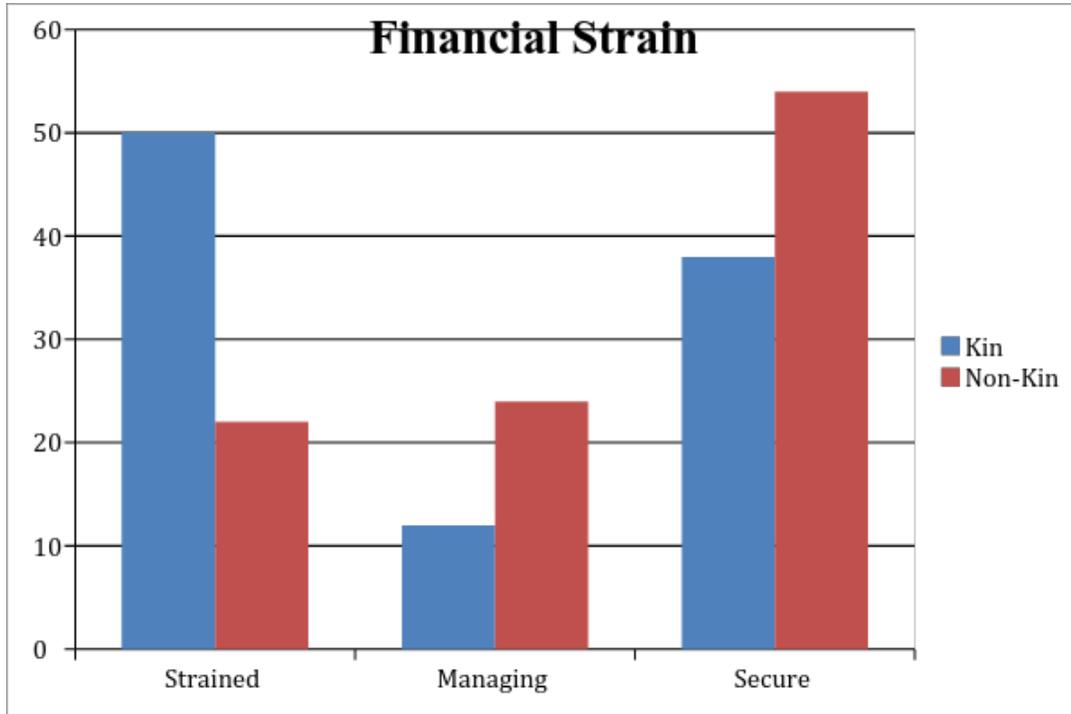
"I am a single mother already working two jobs. The cost of childcare a month was more than I got for the foster child. He came with nothing. I had to buy clothes, shoes, etc. It was hard, but I did the best I could. There was no more going out to dinner, movies, etc." services to help the kids. Show more appreciation for foster parents."



Total annual income levels among kin and non-kin were roughly similar. Approximately one-quarter of kin and non-kin stated their annual income at or below \$25,000 per year. About one-third of caregivers had annual incomes between \$25,000 - \$50,000; and 16% had incomes between \$50,000 - \$75,000.

B) Financial strain:

Kin were more likely to indicate that their financial circumstances were “strained” compared to non-kin. The nature of the financial difficulties in both groups centered on “trouble paying bills.”



At Time II, kin caregivers continued to feel the financial press of their circumstances. Several described “going without,” “eating out less,” “putting things we need on the credit card,” and “stretching.”

Other characteristics of kin and non-kin were largely similar including caregivers’ sense of closeness to the child, their attitudes toward parenting, and they’re perceived social support (though non-kin conveyed a greater degree of social support than kin). The characteristics of children in care were also relatively similar in terms of children’s age and behavioral profile.

II) The relationship between subsidies and child or caregiver characteristics:

Findings from this sample suggest that caregivers receiving TANF or no funding at all compared to caregivers receiving a foster care subsidy cared for children with more challenging peer relationships, reported poorer health, and maintained parenting attitudes that reflected higher levels of attachment to the children in their care.

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In addition, there were some differences detected between caregivers receiving TANF/no funding and caregivers receiving a foster care subsidy in terms of participation in services offered by the child welfare agency. Caregivers receiving foster care payments comprised a higher percentage of caregivers who participated in respite care (75%), support groups (83%), and training (88%). In addition, the children in homes of caregivers receiving a foster care subsidy comprised a higher percentage of those who received educational supports (71%), attended therapy (79%), and participated in summer camp, summer school, or summer work activities offered by the agency (90%). Children in foster care supported placements were also more likely to have a CASA serving on their case.

III) Services:

Kin and non-kin were almost equally likely to have participated in a child welfare service in the previous six months (about one-third). The majority of participating non-kin had attended one or more trainings; kin, on the other hand, were more likely to participate in support groups (some of these were identified as kin-specific; others were not).

Caregivers reported the children in their homes equally likely to participate in services (about 52%). Children in non-kin care were more likely to take advantage of summer camp, summer school, or summer work activities offered by the agency; children in kin care were more likely to participate in therapy. Both groups were equally likely to have a CASA volunteer appointed to their case.

IV) What do caregivers need?

We asked caregivers to identify the top three things that would help make their work with children easier. Comments varied considerably, but were generally similar between kin resources and/or vouchers; (2) responsive social workers; and (3) services for the child.

"We need more financial support and more services to help the kids. Show more appreciation for foster parents."

V Summary:

Overall, we find that the sample of kin and non-kin caregivers included in this study are more similar to one another than they are different with no differences in the characteristics of kin and non-kin for a large majority of measures. This finding is in sharp contrast to dozens of other studies over the past two decades and may be related to the following:

- It may indicate that the two selected counties for this study draw from a different general population than what is typical in other studies.
- Adjustments in kin policy over the past two decades, including the narrowing of licensing standards for kin and non-kin, may have changed who is included among characteristics of kin.
- The profile of conventional foster parents may be changing to bear greater similarities to kin, suggesting more vulnerabilities than what was found in the past and a decline in socio-demographic characteristics. We believe that the introduction of Resource Family Approval standards in California will continue the trend of making more similar kin and non-kin caregivers.

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Overall, the two groups represent economically vulnerable caregivers. One-quarter of kin and non-kin had annual incomes below \$25,000 – well below the poverty rate for a family of four (the average household size in this sample). Another one-third lived on household incomes between \$25,000 - \$50,000, well under the self-sufficiency index generally acknowledged for families living in the greater Bay Area. The stark differences in average monthly payment rates between kin and non-kin at Time I (approximately \$200) are important as most kin were trying to raise their relative children below the sufficiency standards set by the federal government (Lino, 2013). At Time II we found that about half of the kin caregivers had seen their monthly subsidy rise following the implementation of the ARC. We anticipate that the average payment differences between kin and non-kin are likely to continue to diminish, though caregivers in non-ARC counties will continue to see significant payment differentials.

As recently as 2014, it was unknown what proportion of California kin caregivers were receiving foster care payments, what proportion were receiving TANF (non-needy caregiver), and what proportion were receiving nothing. Advocates highlighted the inequities in payment, but it was unclear whether these differentials were playing out for the majority or for a minority of kin. This study revealed larger-than-expected proportions of kin receiving foster care subsidies, but troubling findings regarding the proportion of kin reporting zero state support. Although a small number of caregivers indicated at Time II that they had rejected payments in order to protect their own children from child support obligations, the issue raises concerns that should be monitored – especially in non-ARC counties – as children should not be asked to bear the financial burden of these dramatic payment differentials. That some caregivers were under the impression that they could not obtain financial assistance because of their relationship to the child is also of concern; greater efforts to make all child welfare workers aware of the financial supports available to kin (in ARC and non-ARC counties) may be warranted.

In addition to the increasing similarities seen among kin and non-kin caregiver characteristics, and the now-diminishing differences in payment subsidies between the two groups, this study also revealed more similarities in service access and service needs than has been shown in previous studies. Although the nature of the services selected by kin and non-kin were somewhat different, with non-kin gravitating to training and kin electing support groups, we view these differences as important opportunities that child welfare agencies can take advantage of. Knowledge development can take place in the context of support groups, and the work of Zinn (2012) suggests that kin could benefit from greater access to information about positive parenting strategies. Similarly, important emotional support can occur in the context of training events. Efforts to make more alike training and support opportunities for kin and non-kin (though called by a different name) will tap into the needs of caregivers at the same time that agencies use these activities to improve the overall quality of out-of-home care.

The stated needs of caregivers, to receive greater financial remuneration for their challenging work, to partner with responsive social workers, and to gain access to more services for children, are common themes we see from decades of research on foster care (see, for example, Shlonsky & Berrick, 2001). Child welfare workers are often stretched due to their large work volume. Agency level efforts to support their partnership with kin and non-kin caregivers and to ensure the provision of accurate and timely information about financial supports, the child's case, and service availability will likely have far-reaching effects in reducing caregiver stress and burden, and increasing the quality of care.

When children are taken into the custody of the state, the financial and service supports their caregivers receive should be relatively similar. Variability – if it exists – should be based on the needs of the child. In states across the country significant variation still exists between kin and non-kin, and between licensed and unlicensed kin. California has made great strides to level the playing field, ensuring that kin and non-kin are held to the same standards, that they are granted similar rights, and that they carry out the same

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responsibilities for dependent children. Gradually, California is also showing greater consistency in its policies and practices vis-à-vis kin, offering more similar services and supports. We see these trends as positive as they promote equality between similarly situated children. Our hope is that California will continue to show national leadership in these areas, encouraging other states to develop policies and practices that are consistent among caregivers of vulnerable children in care.

VI) Research method & Data Collection:

This descriptive study relies upon a questionnaire distributed to kin and non-kin caregivers in two California counties in the spring and summer of 2014, and a follow-up survey in February, 2016 of kin and non-kin from the original sample who indicated at Time I that they were receiving zero subsidies or a TANF payment to help pay for the care of their foster child.

Research staff in each of the two counties identified the sample based upon the following parameters: (1) children new to care (first entries) between October 1, 2013 – December 31, 2013; (2) children ages three or older, and ages 17 or younger; (3) children who remained in care for 8 days or longer. A total of 174 (91 in County A and 83 in County B) caregivers were included in the sample – the universe of all eligible caregivers in the county.

Of the 92 respondents to the survey, almost two-thirds (60%) were non-kin caregivers. Less than 5% of caregivers identify as a non-relative family member (NRFM). We include these with our kinship caregivers. All caregivers but one identified as a U.S. citizen. Mirroring data from other large-scale surveys of kin and non-kin caregivers in the U.S., a majority of non-kin caregivers were married or cohabiting (62%); this was true for about 48% of kin caregivers. Kin and non-kin were racially and ethnically diverse. About two-fifths (38%) of caregivers were African American; one-third (31%) were Caucasian; and 15% were Hispanic. Combining African American and Hispanic caregivers in both groups we find that 54% of kin were caregivers of color and 52% of non-kin were caregivers of color (27% and 33% were White in both groups respectively).

Mirroring the distribution found in other studies, almost half (46%) of kinship caregivers indicated that they were the maternal grandmother; another 23% claimed the role as maternal aunt or uncle.

Both kin and non-kin were caring for an average of 2-3 children in the household. This sample distinguished itself from other studies involving kin and non-kin caregivers in that non-kin were statistically more likely to be caring for a larger number of children (2.9 children).** The total household size, including adults, was about 4.1.

The majority of kin and non-kin had attended some college or had higher degrees. Roughly equal percentages of kin and non-kin caregivers worked outside the home (about two-thirds). Both kin and non-kin caregivers described their mental and/or emotional health as very good. On a five-point scale from “poor” (scored as “1”) to “excellent” (scored as “5”), the average score across groups was 4.0. Similarly, caregivers described their physical health as very good. On the same five-point scale, the average score across caregivers was 3.8. There were no differences between groups. Four-fifths of caregivers described themselves as religious or spiritual; there were no differences between kin and non-kin.

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¹We denote statistically significant differences at $p < .01$ with two asterisks (**); significant differences at the $p < .05$ level are indicated with one asterisk (*).

We are grateful to the following Berkeley students who assisted with this project: Julia Hernandez, JuHyeon (Diana) Choi, Jessica Iniguez, Tiffany Lazoya, YuLin (Tiffany) Li, Melissa Martel, Dominic Uyeda. We also extend our thanks to the caregivers who participated in this study.