

Grandparent-Grandchild Households as Indicators of Family-Dependent Care and Support: Characteristics and Policy Implications

Abstract

- ▶ Despite increasing diversity and fluidity in family forms, alongside growing instability in family relationships, primary responsibility for care continues to rest predominantly with families. A salient example is the 'grandparent-grandchild household,' consisting of grandparents and their co-residing grandchildren.
- ▶ This study situates grandparent-grandchild households within the broader context of dynamic family structures and aims to develop policy directions that better address their lived realities and needs. Specifically, it examines the main characteristics of these households, identifies limitations within existing policy and institutional frameworks, and explores avenues for advancing integrated support for families.
- ▶ Grandparent-grandchild households are characterized by dynamic patterns of formation and dissolution, which complicates accurate estimation of their scale. The findings indicate that these households comprise older adults and children — both groups with significant care needs — who cohabit and provide mutual support, while simultaneously experiencing pronounced vulnerabilities across economic, housing, and health domains within the broader context of family-based care. Grandchildren in these households often encounter relational instability, whereas grandparents are more likely to experience social isolation.
- ▶ There is no dedicated policy framework specifically for grandparent-grandchild households. Instead, limited provisions for support are available under the Single-Parent Family Support Act and the Child Welfare Act. In light of the distinctive characteristics of these households, four key limitations in current policy and support systems are identified. First, structural constraints stem from the design of public systems that prioritize family responsibility for care and support. Second, there is a lack of mechanisms for early identification and the provision of continuous support addressing care crises as well as psychological and emotional needs. Third, access to existing policies and services remains restricted. Fourth, there is insufficient recognition of, and support for, grandchildren who provide care for grandparents or siblings.
- ▶ Based on these findings, the study proposes four policy directions: (1) strengthening mechanisms for the identification of grandparent-grandchild households and ensuring continuity of support; (2) alleviating the burdens of care and support borne within grandparent-grandchild households; (3) improving relevant institutional frameworks; and (4) enhancing the role of family centers as key platforms for comprehensive and integrated support for families.

1 Background and Objectives of the Study

- ▶ Amid increasing fluidity in family composition and evolving social perceptions of the family, a diverse range of family forms and living arrangements has emerged in Korean society. Despite these shifts, primary responsibility for care continues to be placed predominantly on the family. A salient example of this enduring reliance is the ‘grandparent-grandchild household,’ composed of grandparents and their co-residing grandchildren.
- ▶ Grandparent-grandchild households are formed under a variety of circumstances, including parental divorce or remarriage, illness, death, or prolonged absence of parents. In many cases, grandparents assume de facto responsibility for the care and support of their grandchildren without holding formal legal guardianship. Grandparents and grandchildren may co-reside for a period prior to reunification with parents, or, when grandparents are no longer able to provide care, children may be placed with relatives or in institutional care settings. Consequently, the formation and dissolution of grandparent-grandchild households are highly fluid, thereby making their precise scale difficult to determine. Existing research indicates that families entering such arrangements — often under sudden and unplanned circumstances — face multidimensional challenges, including economic hardship, intensified caregiving burdens, and the deterioration of grandparents’ physical and mental health (Kim et al., 2011; Park et al., 2021; Jung et al., 2021; Heo, 2020).
- ▶ From a legal and institutional perspective, there is no universally agreed-upon definition of grandparent-grandchild households. Relevant legislative frameworks include the Single-Parent Family Support Act and the Child Welfare Act. The former recognizes grandparent-grandchild households as a special category eligible for certain forms of support, such as child-rearing allowances, while the latter provides assistance to children in kinship care and foster care arrangements, which are closely associated with grandparent-grandchild households.
- ▶ In the absence of a clear legal definition and a dedicated support framework, policy responses addressing the needs of grandparent-grandchild households remain fragmented and limited. Against this backdrop, the present study situates grandparent-grandchild households within the broader context of dynamic family structures and seeks to develop policy measures that more closely align with their lived realities and needs. Specifically, the study aims to identify the key characteristics of grandparent-grandchild households, assess the limitations of existing policies and institutional arrangements, and propose strategies for integrated support for families.
 - To examine the defining characteristics of grandparent-grandchild households, this study analyzes data from the ‘2023 National Survey on Grandparent-Grandchild Households¹⁾’ conducted by the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family. In addition, in-depth, one-on-one interviews were carried out with six individuals from grandparent-grandchild households, including both grandparents and grandchildren in their twenties. To inform the development of policy alternatives, a total of eight expert advisory meetings were convened, involving researchers and field practitioners, alongside policy roundtables with the participation of government officials, experts, and affected individuals.

1) The 2023 National Survey on Grandparent-Grandchild Households, conducted by the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family, surveyed 1,783 grandparents (both maternal and paternal) co-residing with grandchildren under the age of 18 who were not supported by their parents, as well as 1,330 grandchildren aged 10-17 living in these households (Bae et al., 2023: 12). The survey is not classified as an officially approved statistical survey under Korea’s statistical approval system.

2 Main Findings and Policy Implications

1) Current Status and Characteristics of Grandparent-Grandchild Households

- Drawing on the 2023 National Survey on Grandparent-Grandchild Households, interviews conducted for this study, and relevant previous studies, this section examines the current status and characteristics of grandparent-grandchild households. The main findings and policy implications are as follows.
- ▶ In grandparent-grandchild households, where older adults and children co-reside, multiple and intersecting challenges within the domain of family and care are evident. These include gaps in childcare provision (e.g., periods during which grandchildren are left without adequate supervision), the dual caregiving burden borne by grandparents, and instances in which grandchildren assume caregiving responsibilities. Taken together, these findings highlight the need to expand social care provision in order to address multidimensional care deficits.
- (Latchkey children) The 2023 National Survey on Grandparent-Grandchild Households indicates that 5.7% of preschool-aged grandchildren and 16.9% of elementary school-aged grandchildren spent time without a caregiver. On average, this corresponds to 5.7 hours per day for preschool-aged children and 3.5 hours per day for elementary school-aged children (Bae et al., 2023: 94-95). The proportion of grandchildren left alone was higher in households with grandparents under the age of 70, suggesting that caregiving gaps may be closely linked to grandparents' labor force participation. In particular, higher rates were observed among those engaged in non-regular employment (temporary and daily labor) (Bae et al., 2023: 94-96). These findings highlight the importance of incorporating grandparents' employment conditions into the design of policies aimed at reducing childcare gaps.
- (Caregiving grandchildren) In addition, both the existing literature and the qualitative interview data from this study confirm the presence of grandchildren who provide care for grandparents or siblings. This finding highlights the need to identify minor grandchildren in such situations and assess their conditions.
- ▶ Grandchildren in grandparent-grandchild households may experience instability in their relationships with family members, including parents and grandparents, in the process of becoming part of such households, and may consequently experience psychological and emotional distress. From a legal perspective, they may also be placed in situations where guardianship is unclear.
- Grandchildren typically come to live with grandparents for reasons such as parental divorce, illness, accidents, death, economic hardship, or prolonged parental absence. In some cases, grandparents provide temporary care before the parents resume childrearing; in other cases, children return to their parents and are later return to their grandparents due to parental divorce or other circumstances. In certain instances, contact with parents may be entirely severed following placement with grandparents. As a result, relational instability is often inherent from the initial stage of household formation. Even in cases of long-term co-residence, grandchildren may experience persistent uncertainty regarding the continuity of care, particularly in the event of grandparents' illness or death, and may face ambiguity concerning future living arrangements. Under such conditions, they are at heightened risk of experiencing separation-related anxiety and depression. As these difficulties may remain latent and not readily observable, they require sustained monitoring and continuous support. In this context, schools, childcare and educational institutions, and local communities play a critical role in identifying and supporting vulnerable children. However, the 2023 National Survey on Grandparent-Grandchild Households indicates that 13.5% of grandchildren reported experiencing unfair treatment or discrimination from neighbors, 10.2% from schools, and 9.5% from family members or relatives (Bae et al., 2023: 376). These findings suggest that grandchildren may operate within social environments that discourage the disclosure of emotional distress or help-seeking behaviors. Accordingly, policy responses should extend beyond direct psychological and emotional support to include broader efforts to improve community awareness.

- A structural mismatch often exists between de facto caregivers and legal guardians in grandparent-grandchild households. Where grandparents are not formally designated as legal guardians, they may assume full responsibility for caregiving while lacking the legal authority to give consent or act as legal representatives for the children.
- ▶ Grandparents in grandparent-grandchild households frequently experience social isolation. Many are reluctant to disclose their family circumstances or may relocate in order to provide care, resulting in weakened ties to local communities. This isolation can constrain access to informal support networks in times of emergency, including urgent caregiving needs, and may increase the risk of depression, thereby underscoring the need for targeted intervention.
 - In practice, grandparents often face constraints on mobility due to sole caregiving responsibilities, limiting opportunities for social participation. In some cases, they withdraw from existing social relationships or are hesitant to establish new ones due to stigma associated with family circumstances, such as their adult children's divorce or unemployment. The 2023 National Survey on Grandparent-Grandchild Households further indicates that grandparents' support networks are typically confined to their own children and public institutions; when adult children are geographically distant or when intergenerational ties are strained or severed, grandparents are likely to undertake caregiving in conditions close to social isolation. The existing literature likewise indicates that grandparents who relocate to care for grandchildren may experience intensified isolation due to the absence of established social ties (Jung et al., 2021: 124). As such isolation may lead to depression, appropriate intervention and support are required.
- ▶ Grandparent-grandchild households tend to exhibit vulnerabilities across key domains of family resources — including economic conditions, housing stability, and grandparents' health — thereby underscoring the need for strengthened linkages to, and support from, public resources to ensure stability.
 - With regard to economic conditions, the existing literature indicates that children in grandparent-grandchild households are more likely to be situated in economically disadvantaged environments compared to those in general households (Jung et al., 2021: 37; Heo, 2020: 4). The 2023 National Survey on Grandparent-Grandchild Households similarly confirms the economic vulnerability of these households. According to the survey, only 27.7% of grandparents were engaged in paid work, with a relatively high proportion employed in temporary or day labor. Moreover, 53.4% reported receiving support from the National Basic Livelihood Security System following the formation of a grandparent-grandchild household (Bae et al., 2023: 199, 201, 271).
 - In terms of housing conditions, issues such as the burden of housing costs and the need to address deteriorating living environments are prominent. The 2023 National Survey on Grandparent-Grandchild Households indicates that grandparent-grandchild households primarily reside in owner-occupied housing (39.7%) or public rental housing (31.7%) (Bae et al., 2023: 296). However, given their low levels of labor force participation and their reliance on public assistance or government support as primary income sources, these households may face constraints in maintaining adequate housing conditions. Analysis of the 2020 Housing Survey further shows that the proportion of grandparent-grandchild households experiencing excessive housing cost burdens is higher than that observed among all households with children or single-parent households. In addition, a comparatively large share of these households reports a need for housing support, particularly in relation to home repair and improvement (Kim et al., 2022: 103).
 - With respect to grandparents' health, the 2023 National Survey on Grandparent-Grandchild Households found that 66.9% of respondents assessed their overall health as poor (combining 'very poor' and 'poor'), while 62.3% reported living with chronic illnesses (Bae et al., 2023: 184, 187). The health status of grandparents may further deteriorate as a result of sustained caregiving demands, potentially leading to situations in which grandparents are no longer able to provide adequate care. In some cases, this may result in a reversal of care roles, with minor grandchildren assuming caregiving responsibilities.

2) Current Status and Limitations of Policies for Supporting Grandparent-Grandchild Households

- The current institutional and policy landscape for grandparent-grandchild households can be summarized as follows.
 - ▶ At present, no dedicated support system exists that specifically targets grandparent-grandchild households. Rather, the basis for policy intervention is embedded within broader family and child welfare policy frameworks. Within the domain of family policy, grandparent-grandchild households are recognized as a special category of beneficiaries under the Single-Parent Family Support Act. Subject to income eligibility criteria, they may access a range of welfare benefits and family services, including child allowances and educational support for children (e.g., school-related expenses). In addition, under the Child Welfare Act, grandparent-grandchild households are incorporated into child protection frameworks, particularly through kinship care and foster care arrangements. In cases of kinship care, they are eligible for support targeting vulnerable children and families, while foster care arrangements provide more comprehensive assistance until the end of the foster care period, including caregiving subsidies, living expenses, psychological assessment and treatment for children, support for independent living and higher education, housing assistance (e.g., Jeonse(long-term rent with lump-sum deposit)-based rental housing), and case management services.
 - ▶ Beyond these frameworks, there are also policies and programs that explicitly include grandparent-grandchild households as target beneficiaries. These are particularly prominent in the domain of care services, including childcare services such as community child centers and educational expense support; elder care services such as customized care services for older adults and emergency safety services for older adults living alone or with disabilities; and family care support services such as home-visit care and housekeeping support programs and daily care services. In addition, there are programs providing public housing support, cultural vouchers (e.g., integrated cultural use vouchers and sports vouchers), and menstrual product vouchers for female adolescents.²⁾
- Within this policy context, several limitations become apparent when these arrangements are assessed in light of the specific characteristics of grandparent-grandchild households.
 - ▶ Structural constraints arise from the principle of prioritizing private (family-based) support under the Civil Act.
 - Korea's care and support system is grounded in the principle that it primarily relies on family-based (private) support, while public support serves a supplementary role. Within grandparent-grandchild households, grandparents frequently assume responsibility for addressing and sustaining gaps in care and support resulting from the circumstances of parents, who are primarily responsible for the protection and upbringing of minor children. The legal basis for this arrangement is found in Article 974 of the Civil Act, which stipulates mutual support obligations among relatives. However, the existing literature (Song et al., 2022) has critically examined this framework, arguing that enforcing private support based on traditional kinship-based status relations is no longer compatible with contemporary changes in families and society. As family fluidity intensifies, the divergence between legal guardians (parents) and de facto caregivers has become more pronounced (Song et al., 2022: 102), resulting in recurring gaps in the protection and care of minor children. In response, scholars have called for institutional reform that reduces the scope of kinship-based support obligations and alleviates the burden of private support rooted in blood ties and family status (Song et al., 2022: 99), while strengthening the role of public support. In this context, policy directions aimed at alleviating the burden of family-based support and care in grandparent-grandchild households require more proactive consideration.
 - ▶ There remains a systemic gap in the early identification of care crises and in the provision of continuous psychological and emotional support for grandparent-grandchild households.

2) A brief description of these policies and their sources can be found in Integrated Support for Grandparent-Grandchild Households (Kim, Song, & Kwon, 2024), Table III-12, 'Overview of Central Government Policies Including Grandparent-Grandchild Households as Target Beneficiaries' (pp. 46-48).

- Grandparent-grandchild households comprise older adults and children who both require care. Given that both grandparents and grandchildren may experience emotional instability or depressive symptoms during the process of household formation, timely identification and proactive support are essential. However, the identification of such households is inherently challenging due to their distinctive characteristics. As noted, co-residence often begins under conditions of uncertainty regarding whether the arrangement is temporary or long-term, rendering these households difficult to detect at an early stage. In addition, grandparents may be reluctant to disclose family circumstances — such as divorce, separation, or parental absence — which further impedes identification. Within the current system, which relies primarily on self-application for access to services, there are clear limitations in identifying households with limited access to information and less likely to seek assistance (Park, 2021: 165; Jung et al., 2021: 184-185). Moreover, policy frameworks that prioritize the identification of economically disadvantaged households may fail to capture those that do not meet income thresholds but nonetheless experience acute care deficits or require psychological and emotional support.
 - Beyond initial identification, the need for continuous monitoring and sustained intervention is equally critical. As grandparents age, households are increasingly likely to experience heightened economic vulnerability and declining health status. Accordingly, there is a need to regularly assess caregiving and livelihood arrangements within the household and to provide appropriate support and prevent the escalation of risk. In addition, issues such as difficulties experienced by grandparents in supporting grandchildren’s learning, conflicts between grandparents and grandchildren, and psychological challenges such as depression among family members may not be easily resolved solely through the provision of information or connections to relevant services and resources, and thus require ongoing support and management. However, existing public case management systems, including programs such as Dream Start, exhibit limitations in delivering continuous, life-course-oriented support spanning from early childhood through adolescence, and may not sufficiently reflect the specific needs of grandparent-grandchild households. While alternative programs — such as the vulnerable and at-risk family support program (the Comprehensive Family Support Program) implemented through family centers, and foster family case management services — offer more tailored forms of support, they remain constrained by limited duration (in the case of family center programs) or by insufficient nationwide infrastructure (in the case of foster care support centers).
- ▶ Limited accessibility to existing policies and services constitutes an additional constraint.
- Grandparent-grandchild households exhibit vulnerabilities across multiple domains, including economic conditions, housing, health, psychological and emotional well-being, and legal matters, which underscores their need for government support. Improving accessibility, both in terms of information provision and application processes, is therefore a critical policy consideration. In the absence of a dedicated institutional framework, however, these households are required to independently identify and navigate a fragmented array of policies and programs. Many of these schemes — particularly those related to income support and care services — operate under complex and heterogeneous eligibility criteria, often involving multiple thresholds related to income, assets, and family composition. At the same time, there are insufficient mechanisms to convey such diverse and complex information in an accessible manner. Tailored policy guidance specifically designed for grandparent-grandchild households is lacking, and outreach-based information services targeting grandparents, who often experience social isolation, remain limited.
 - Furthermore, access to government support generally requires users to apply independently, and applications are typically conducted online. Given that older adults are more likely to face digital exclusion, there is a clear need to strengthen digital accessibility and support for grandparents in these households.

- ▶ Recognition and support for grandchildren who provide care for grandparents or siblings also remains insufficient.
 - Although there are cases of minor grandchildren in grandparent-grandchild households who provide care for grandparents or siblings, government policy has thus far inadequately recognized family caregiving by grandchildren. This is related to the broader social context in which the issue of children and adolescents bearing responsibilities for family care and support has only recently emerged as a policy agenda. Recent studies indicate that child and youth caregivers face not only difficulties related to education, career pathways, and future planning, but also economic and emotional challenges, and may be at risk of experiencing issues such as credit delinquency or depression if such conditions persist (Kim et al., 2023; Ham, 2023). These findings underscore the need for policy intervention. In the context of grandparent-grandchild households, where grandchildren often co-reside with middle-aged or older grandparents, the likelihood of assuming caregiving or even financial responsibilities during childhood or adolescence may be comparatively higher. Accordingly, reducing the caregiving burden placed on grandchildren should constitute a central consideration in policies aimed at supporting grandparent-grandchild households.

3 Policy Measures for Supporting Grandparent-Grandchild Households

- ◉ Strengthening the Identification and Continuous Support of Grandparent-Grandchild Households
 - ▶ Diversifying Channels for Identifying Grandparent-Grandchild Households
 - Given the low visibility of grandparent-grandchild households, it is necessary to diversify approaches to identifying such households. The following approaches may be considered:
 - ▶ Utilizing universal public institutions — such as childcare centers, schools, and community service centers — as key entry points for identifying such households.
 - ▶ Identifying households in need of support by systematically assessing care conditions and service needs among households with children or older adults, as well as among applicants for social welfare services with children under the age of 18 (Kang et al., 2023: 249).
 - ▶ Detecting cases of children and young people who provide care in households where grandparents receive home-visit health and medical services (Kim et al., 2023: 403).
 - ▶ Conducting regular national surveys to establish reliable statistics on grandparent-grandchild households and to identify those requiring policy support.
 - ▶ Improving Access to Support Policies
 - Enhancing grandparent-friendly information delivery: developing comprehensive policy guides tailored to grandparent-grandchild households; disseminating information through home-based service providers, including those delivering childcare services and customized elder care services; and strengthening information provision and linkages to relevant services through the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family's family counseling hotline (1577-4206), particularly for grandparents with limited digital literacy.
 - Improving systems to address barriers arising from application-based service delivery: streamlining application procedures and expanding automatic or administratively initiated enrollment mechanisms (Inter-ministerial Joint Task Force, 2023: 33).
 - Strengthening digital capacity among grandparents: providing access to outreach-based digital literacy programs for older adults and linking participation in such programs with childcare support services.

▶ Expanding Continuous Intervention and Support

- Strengthening and expanding public case management systems to ensure sustained and integrated support for grandparent-grandchild households facing care gaps, crises, or psychological and emotional difficulties. Specific measures include:
 - ▶ Expanding the scope of public case management programs (e.g., integrated case management involving ‘Dream Start’ and ‘Hope Welfare Support Team’) to include households facing caregiving challenges regardless of income level, alongside increasing the number of case managers and related personnel.
 - ▶ Ensuring continuity of support for grandchildren by establishing an integrated and continuous child-centered public case management system; extending support coverage to late adolescence and early adulthood (ages 19-24); and strengthening linkages with youth and young adult policy frameworks.
 - ▶ Enhancing the role of family centers by extending the duration of support or introducing follow-up monitoring and resource linkage mechanisms after the completion of case management services, as well as strengthening professional qualification standards and training systems for personnel.
- Considering the introduction of a monitoring system for children in kinship care arrangements, including those in grandparent-grandchild households: establishing municipal-level (Si/Gun/Gu) systems to identify and regularly monitor such households; and developing mechanisms to assess and respond to the situations and needs of children in informal kinship care who fall outside the formal foster care system (Lee et al., 2023: 316).

● Reducing Care and Financial Burdens in Grandparent-Grandchild Households

▶ Reducing Financial Burdens through Strengthened Livelihood and Housing Assistance

- Expanding basic allowances (e.g., child allowances) provided on an individual basis regardless of household composition.
- Strengthening the coverage of the National Basic Livelihood Security System for low-income grandparent-grandchild households.
- Improving systems to enhance housing stability, including easing housing cost burdens and providing priority access to public rental housing.

▶ Supporting Grandparent-Grandchild Households through Expanded Public Care Services

- Support for grandparent-grandchild households requires both the expansion of services reflecting their specific characteristics and the strengthening of the overall public care system for children and older adults to ensure more comprehensive care provision.
- Expanding services tailored to the characteristics of these households: hourly care services (e.g., childcare services) to address care gaps such as ‘latchkey children’; home-visit care services for socially isolated grandparents (e.g., customized care services for older adults); and expanded daily living support services for grandchildren providing family care.
- To alleviate care burdens, it is important not only to provide specialized services but also to expand public child care and elder care services overall, while improving accessibility so that necessary services can be easily utilized according to the life-stage and specific circumstances of household members.

● Improving Institutional Frameworks

- ▶ Reforming Private Support Systems to Reduce the Burden of Family Support Obligations
 - Reducing the scope of familial support obligations: revising relevant provisions of the Civil Act to limit the broad scope of familial support obligations primarily to parent-child relationships (Song et al., 2022: 102-103), while strengthening public support systems to address potential gaps in child protection resulting from the reduction of private support.
 - Restricting the right to claim support by parents who have seriously violated their support obligations: introducing provisions to limit the exercise of such claims in cases of severe neglect, criminal acts, abuse, or other forms of seriously unfair treatment, taking into account the overall circumstances of the parties involved (Song et al., 2022: 103).
- ▶ Improving the Single-Parent Family Support Act to Expand Support for Grandparent-Grandchild Households
 - Revising eligibility criteria: expanding the current scope of support, which is limited to either ‘grandfather or grandmother,’ to include both grandparents. Given that grandparent-grandchild households are included as a special category, it is not necessary to strictly require that grandparents meet the definition of a single-parent household.
 - Increasing additional child-rearing allowances and expanding the eligible age range: reflecting the characteristic of grandparent-grandchild households that grandparents become more vulnerable as children grow older, expanding additional child-rearing allowances — currently provided only for children under age five — to all children under 18, and increasing the amount to KRW 100,000 per month, in line with additional support provided to single parents aged 25-34, through revision of relevant guidelines by the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family.
- ▶ Strengthening Legal Service Support Tailored to the Specific Needs of Grandparent-Grandchild Households
 - Expanding legal counseling services to address situations such as grandparents applying for legal guardianship of minor grandchildren and cases in which grandchildren who are minors inherit debts from their parents.
- **Strengthening the Functions of Family Centers for Integrated Support**
- ▶ Enhancing the capacity and institutional foundation of family centers, as family support service providers, to provide information, connect households with relevant resources and services, and deliver support for grandparent-grandchild households, including through building networks with local administrative bodies and related organizations within the community.

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Supervising ministries

Family Support Division; Family Policy Division, Ministry of Gender Equality and Family

Related ministries

Division of Child Rights; Division of Senior Policy, Ministry of Health and Welfare
Housing Welfare Support Division, Ministry of Land, Infrastructure and Transport
Local governments (departments responsible for child protection and family support)