Lean On Me

Support and Minority Outreach for Grandparents Raising Grandchildren

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Focus Group Data collected and prepared by The Turtle Bay Institute, The Media Network, and The Quan Market Research Company
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AARP is a nonprofit, nonpartisan membership organization dedicated to making life better for people 50 and over. We provide information and resources; engage in legislative, regulatory and legal advocacy; assist members in serving their communities; and offer a wide range of unique benefits, special products, and services for our members. These include AARP The Magazine, published bimonthly; AARP Bulletin, our monthly newspaper; AARP Segunda Juventud, our quarterly newspaper in Spanish; NRTA Live and Learn, our quarterly newsletter for 50+ educators; and our Web site, www.aarp.org. We have staffed offices in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

The AARP Grandparent Information Center (AARP GIC) provides national and local level information and referrals for grandparents, program practitioners, researchers, policymakers and the general public. We offer a free quarterly newsletter for grandparents raising grandchildren, various print publications, and a national Support Database available on the Web site www.aarp.org/grandparents.

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# Table of Contents

**Executive Summary** ........................................................................................................ 2

**Introduction** .................................................................................................................. 5

**Census Data** ................................................................................................................... 7

**Support Groups** .............................................................................................................. 11
  - Background ....................................................................................................................... 11
  - Focus Groups .................................................................................................................... 14
    - Methods ......................................................................................................................... 14
    - Support Group Members’ Perceptions ........................................................................... 15
    - Nonmembers’ Perceptions of Support Groups ............................................................... 22

**Grandparent Support Group Survey** .............................................................................. 28
  - Methods ........................................................................................................................... 28
  - Summary of Survey Findings ......................................................................................... 29

**Minority Outreach** .......................................................................................................... 39
  - Background ....................................................................................................................... 39
  - African American Grandparent Caregivers .................................................................. 41
  - Hispanic Grandparent Caregivers ................................................................................. 43
  - Native American Grandparent Caregivers .................................................................... 45

**Conclusions and Recommendations** ............................................................................ 47

**Bibliography** .................................................................................................................. 55

**Appendices** .................................................................................................................... 57
Executive Summary

Key Findings

- Census 2000 data indicate 4.5 million children are living in grandparent-headed households, a 30% increase from 1990 to 2000. Grandparents responsible for most of the basic needs of grandchildren living with them number 2.4 million.

- While the largest numbers of children living in grandparents’ homes are Caucasian, there are higher percentages of children within certain racial/ethnic groups, including African Americans (13.2%) and Hispanics (7.8%). The fastest growing segment of children living in grandparent-headed homes is Hispanic.

- There is a concentration of grandparent caregivers and their grandchildren in the South, Southwest and urban centers in the North. This concentration is parallel to the distribution of minority adults age 50+.

- Grandparent caregivers are highly in need of accurate, easily accessible, timely information and assistance about issues such as legal, financial, support services (such as counseling, respite care, mentoring, tutoring, activities for grandchildren, etc.), health, housing, education and childrearing. Information in general is often very difficult to obtain, and grandparents are overwhelmed when trying to “navigate the system.”

- Outreach efforts have not adequately educated grandparents raising grandchildren. Many grandparent caregivers do not know about services or programs that are presently available in their communities.

- Minority grandparents (in particular, Spanish-speaking Hispanics and Native Americans) are particularly uninformed or misinformed.

- Grandparent support groups are an excellent outreach mechanism and a growing trend. They benefit grandparent caregivers by providing both information and emotional/psychological support. This dual agenda is key to promoting support groups and recruiting members.

- Grandparent caregivers seek comprehensive central resource centers (or “one-stop
shopping” centers) in their communities. They want to be able to access programs, services, benefits and advice in one location.

**Key Recommendations**

- Major national, state and local outreach campaigns are needed to educate grandparent caregivers about existing resources. Outreach efforts must be specifically targeted for the various populations, in particular minority populations. Information must be given at a level that is easy to comprehend by all grandparents, regardless of age, preferred language, or educational background.

- Outreach efforts should include a focus on Spanish-speaking Hispanic and Native American grandparent caregivers.

- Faith-based organizations and schools are key partners in outreach efforts, especially for minority grandparents.

- The following supportive services/programs should be increased across the United States:
  - Support groups
  - State and local level information, referral and assistance services, including Web sites, ‘hotlines,’ ‘warmlines,’ Web sites or ‘navigation’ programs
  - Comprehensive resource centers (or “one-stop shopping” centers).

- Local support groups for grandparents raising grandchildren should consider a number of options to expand outreach and services for members. Recommendations include:
  - Utilize television and radio for promotion.
  - Emphasize the information component of the support group.
  - Provide programs and services for the grandchildren, including on-site childcare, support groups for teens, tutoring and mentoring programs.
  - Provide respite care for members.
  - Provide information mechanisms such as a Web site and telephone assistance.
Various structures for support groups may make it easier for grandparents to take advantage of them. Structuring recommendations include:

- Develop an association with a sponsoring agency.

- Use peer and professional leaders/facilitators.

- Offer telephone support group meetings and/or in-person meetings at various locations and times.

- Provide transportation.

- Meet the informational needs of members through guest speakers, professional facilitators and partnerships with social service, faith-based or community-based agencies.
Introduction

Over the past ten years, the AARP Grandparent Information Center (AARP GIC) has served grandparents across the United States. The AARP GIC’s primary focus is on grandparents who have grandchildren living in their households. Some are primary caregivers for those grandchildren, raising them without the presence of parents. Over the past decade, we have seen increases in the numbers of children being raised in grandparent-headed households, in the numbers of minority children being raised by grandparents and in the support for the millions of grandparents (and other relatives) raising these children.

Whether grandparents are the primary caregivers of grandchildren living in their homes, or a parent is also present (or perhaps is an intermittent presence in the grandchild’s life), grandparents face a myriad of challenges related to:

- Finances
- Legal concerns
- Health (both physical and mental health and insurance)
- Housing
- Education
- Respite care
- Childrearing (discipline, rules, boundaries etc.)
- Family communication and relationships
- Special needs of grandchildren
- Social isolation

The AARP GIC has provided information and referrals to grandparents on these issues for a decade. In recent years, AARP state offices have increased their role at the local level. These offices assist communities in organizing information and referral mechanisms and support groups for grandparent caregivers in their states. They often reach out to minority populations.

To enhance AARP’s work nationally and in the states, the AARP GIC undertook research in 2003 to attain a better understanding of the most effective ways to reach and assist these grandparents. Support groups for grandparents (and often other relatives) raising children are a key outreach mechanism and link to these grandparents. Therefore, particular attention was given to support groups in this research. The AARP GIC also hoped to provide other organizations (such as aging, children/youth, minority, social services, public/governmental and the business community) with valuable insight as they organize efforts to support grandparents and other relative caregivers.

The goals of this research project were twofold: to take a closer look at support groups for grandparents, and to learn more about outreach to minority grandparent caregivers. For the
purposes of this study, we focused our efforts on three minority groups: African American, Hispanic and Native American. Significant numbers and percentages of children within these cultural/ethnic groups are living in grandparent-headed households. Other cultural/ethnic minorities also include many grandparents raising grandchildren.

Through this research project the AARP GIC hoped to:

- Increase knowledge about support groups for grandparents raising grandchildren, both from the grandparents’ viewpoint and from the support group leaders’ perspective, including:
  - Effective promotion and recruitment methods, including characteristics that attract grandparents or discourage them from joining
  - Effective start-up and sustaining strategies
  - Characteristics of support group members
  - Characteristics of support groups, including:
    - Leadership
    - Frequency and format of meetings
    - Location
    - Size
    - Funding
    - Association with sponsoring agencies
    - Offerings in addition to support group meetings

- Increase knowledge about the needs of and the most effective ways to conduct outreach to minority grandparent caregivers, and how they are being served through support groups, to determine if there are differences in needs and effective approaches among the various populations.

This report outlines the AARP GIC’s findings, conclusions and recommendations. An environmental scan provided a comprehensive review of current literature and research. We obtained additional insight through focus groups with grandparent caregivers who are currently support group members and those who are not currently involved in support groups. Quantitative data was gathered through a national survey of grandparent (and in some cases other relative) support groups.

This report is organized according to overall findings about support groups. A separate section outlines information gathered about minority issues and outreach. This section focuses on any support group findings particular to minority populations, important outreach considerations and types of information and support needed.
Census Data

U.S. Census 2000 data indicate a rapid and marked increase in the number of children being raised in grandparent-headed households.

Ê U.S. Census 1990 indicated 3.5 million children living in grandparent-headed households, or 5.5% of all children under age 18.

Ê U.S. Census 2000 indicated 4.5 million children living in grandparent-headed households, 6.3% of all children in the U.S. under age 18 — a 30% increase over a decade. There was a 15% increase between 1997 and 2000 alone, indicating a rapid and significant increase over a short period of time.

Ê Some states showed a much higher percentage increase over the decade. State increases included: Nevada (109%), Utah (108%), Idaho (79%), Arizona (74%), Colorado (73%), Minnesota (65%), Wyoming (61%), Washington (59%), Montana (54%), and California (50%). (For a complete listing of states with regard to the percentage increase from 1990 to 2000 please see Appendix 1.)

Ê Some states show a much higher percentage of their children as living in grandparent-headed households, including Hawaii (12.9%), Mississippi (10.8%), Louisiana (9.7%), South Carolina (9%), Alabama (8.2%), New Mexico (8.1%), Texas (7.6%), Georgia (7.6%), and Arkansas (7.4%). The District of Columbia data show 14.5% of their children living in grandparents’ homes. (For a complete listing of states and the percentage of children living in grandparent-headed households see Appendix 1.)

Ê Some states have extremely high numbers of children living in grandparent-headed households. The top 10 states in terms of number of children are California (625,934), Texas (448,439), New York (297,239), Florida (258,952), Illinois (213,465), Georgia (164,423), Pennsylvania (164,354), Ohio (157,298), Michigan (143,523) and North Carolina (135,158).

Ê Higher percentages of children in certain racial/ethnic groups under age 18 are being raised in grandparent-headed households. Census 2000 data indicate 4.2% of all Caucasian children are living in grandparent-headed homes, while 13.2% of all African American children are living in grandparent-headed homes, and 7.8% of all Hispanic children are living in their grandparents’ homes. Further, 10.6% of all children who are reported in the “other” category are living in grandparent-headed households — this
includes Native American and Pacific Islanders; the “two or more” category reports 7.9% of children in grandparent-headed homes indicating higher percentages of children living with grandparents in most minority segments.

Increases from 1990 to 2000 among certain racial/ethnic groups have been higher, indicating the fastest growing segment of children living in grandparent-headed homes are Hispanic, with the African American segment close behind.

One indication of the magnitude of this issue is that policymakers requested only one new question be added to the U.S. Census 2000. The question provided data about grandparent caregivers. The results were as follows:

More than 2.4 million grandparents in the U.S. report being responsible for most of the basic needs of grandchildren living in their household. (The children’s parents may or may not also be present in this household.)

Because this question was not previously asked in the Census, no comparison can be made over time, but we can safely assume that as the number of grandchildren living in grandparent-headed households has increased, so has the number of grandparent caregivers.

The numbers of grandparents responsible for most of the basic needs of grandchildren living with them are highest in the following ten states: California (294,969), Texas (257,074), Florida (147,893), New York (143,014), Illinois (103,717), Georgia (92,265), Ohio (86,009), Pennsylvania (80,423), North Carolina (79,810), and Michigan (70,044). (For a complete listing of the states and the number of grandparents responsible for most of the basic needs of grandchildren living with them, see Appendix 1.)

The increasing numbers of both grandchildren and grandparent caregivers documented through the Census indicate a need for increased outreach, support and information. Grandparents who take on this vital role are making a great contribution to our society, but often face great challenges in doing so. Given the high incidence of children being raised by grandparents within minority populations (in particular African American, Hispanic and Native American), targeted outreach efforts are especially needed.
Figure 1
Numbers of Children under 18 in Grandparent-Headed Households by County: 2000

Figure 2
Percent of Children under 18 Living in Grandparent-Headed Households by County: 2000
**Figure 3**  
Percent of 30+ Population Who Are Co-Resident Grandparents Responsible for Most of the Basic Needs of Grandchildren Living with Them by County: 2000

**Figure 4**  
Percent of 50+ Population Racial/Ethnic Minority by County: 2002
Support Groups

Background

According to a study cited in *To Grandmother’s House We Go and Stay* (C. Cox, ed., 2000), approximately 11% of all caregiver grandmothers belong to a grandparent support group (N. Silverstein & L. Vehvilainen, “Grandparents and Schools: Issues and Potential Challenges”). Since this statistic is derived from research conducted in 1997, and there is evidence that the number of support groups nationwide has been growing, this percentage may well be higher now.

In 1998, the number of support groups across the U.S. had reached over 500 (K. Roe, “Community Interventions to Support Grandparent Caregivers” in *To Grandmother’s House We Go and Stay*, C. Cox, ed., 2000). Today, support groups listed in the AARP Grandparent Information Center’s national support database number over 800. Determining the precise number of support groups across the U.S. is a difficult, if not impossible, challenge. To our knowledge no national survey of support groups has been fielded. The author of the dissertation “Grandparents Raising Grandchildren: An Exploration of Their Parenting Stress and Perceived Social Support” (E. Heywood, University of Virginia, 2001) points out that these groups “are often short-lived,” suffering from such problems as inadequate funding and poor attendance. These factors contribute to the difficulty in identifying and tracking support groups across the nation.

The function of support groups, in general, is to provide an “expansion of social resources, knowledge relevant to members’ situation, relief and reassurance, and enhanced coping skills….” These purposes are realized through the mutual aid of members — the person-to-person exchange of reassurance, information and resources” (C. Cohen & R. Pyle, “Support Groups in the Lives of Grandmothers Raising Grandchildren,” *To Grandmother’s House We Go and Stay*, 2000).

Grandparents raising grandchildren are especially in need of support. Their caregiving role can be very stressful, particularly when the need arises because of tragic circumstances in the lives of the parents, such as divorce, death or the parents’ inability to care for their children due to chemical dependency, mental illness, incarceration, financial challenges or other problems.

Grandparent caregivers also face added financial responsibilities. For some grand-
parents, responsibilities for raising grandchildren often lead to quitting (or losing) a job or perhaps cutting back their work hours. Finding affordable, quality childcare and/or after-school care can be a major challenge, and often cost more than a grandparent can earn. Retired or nonworking grandparent caregivers often spend their retirement savings on legal fees, medical fees or the everyday expenses associated with raising a child. Their own needs tend to come last.

Still other sources of stress are “legal problems… encountered by grandparents who have physical custody of their grandchildren but do not have legal custody. Enrolling a child in school, daycare and sports activities in the absence of legal custody can be difficult and frustrating, [as can] obtaining medical and dental care” (E. Heywood, dissertation, 2001). As Roe points out, “Grandparents raising grandchildren must often navigate distinctly different and sometimes contradictory social systems… aging and child welfare systems, schools and health care, legal and financial services,” each with their own “pre-existing lines of bureaucracy, funding streams [and] community alliances” (To Grandmother’s We Go and Stay, 2000).

In addition to these sources of stress, grandparent caregivers often suffer from social isolation. These grandparents’ “new caregiving responsibilities may mean significantly less time with other families or friends and may also constrict participation in church and other valued social organizations and activities…. Grandparents who are raising their grandchildren because of such a problem as an adult child’s alcohol or substance abuse [may also feel] guilt or shame” that causes them to avoid family and friends (Minkler & Roe, Generations, Spring 1996). These circumstances differ from both members of their own generation and younger “traditional” parents raising children, and these grandparents may experience a sense of disconnection or “alienation” (E. Heywood, 2001) — what Cohen & Pyle refer to as “being ‘out of sync’ with generational patterns” (To Grandmother’s House We Go and Stay, 2000).

In short, “grand[parents] raising grandchildren must deal with an accumulation of demands for money, time and realignment of family relationships within the context of an ambiguous role that may or may not have legal status…. [For such grandparents], support groups can provide an oasis from the day-to-day struggle” (Cohen & Pyle, To Grandmother’s House We Go and Stay, 2000) — a safe place
in which to vent their fears and frustrations and receive understanding and empathy from others who are “in the same boat.” In Cohen & Pyle’s opinion, this aspect of support groups — the “encouragement and camaraderie” afforded to their members — is “possibly [their] most important aspect,” allowing members to “develop strong emotional ties that extend outside the group.”

Yet support groups also serve an important “instrumental function,” Pinson-Millburn & Fabian assert, providing their members the opportunity to learn from one another’s mistakes and share practical advice and information with each other (for example, information on “such topics as access to financial resources, legal issues [and] health care”) (“Grandparents Raising Grandchildren,” *Journal of Counseling & Development*, July/Aug 1996). The value of this aspect of support group participation is underscored by one of the findings of Minkler & Roe’s study of grandmothers and great-grandmothers caring for the children of crack-addicted mothers (*Grandmothers as Caregivers: Raising Children of the Crack Cocaine Epidemic*, 1993). Of their study’s 71 participants, 13 were members of a support group, and one of the key benefits of membership named by these participants was the “instrumental assistance provided” by the group leader, in particular, when it came to “tracking down needed services or dealing with the bureaucracy.” Help with navigating the social service system was needed by participants in New York City’s Children’s Aid Society pilot Kinship Parenting Education and Support Program. This program targets Latino kinship caregivers, Cox et al. report (“Culture and Caregiving: A Study of Latino Grandparents,” *To Grandmother’s House We Go and Stay*, 2000).

Support groups vary in format and structure. Some are led by members, while others are facilitated by a trained moderator. Some incorporate guest speakers and educational activities. Others employ a free-discussion format. A number of groups target specialized audiences such as caregivers with responsibility for children born with HIV/AIDS, or developmental disabilities. Some groups focus on caregivers of children of incarcerated parents. Many
grandparent support groups are sponsored by an agency, such as a youth organization (for example YWCA/YMCA), social service agency (child focused or aging focused), faith-based organization, advocacy organization, school, or community center.

**Focus Groups**

**Methods**

AARP conducted a total of fourteen (14) focus groups in the U.S. during June and July of 2003. All participants in the focus groups were grandparent caregivers. Six of the focus groups consisted of a mix of grandparents representing various racial groups or ethnicities (i.e., Caucasian, African American, and/or Hispanic). Eight (8) of the groups were conducted exclusively with ethnic minority grandparents. These groups consisted of African Americans, Hispanic and Native Americans grandparents. Focus groups were either:

(a) exclusively grandparents who currently are not members of grandparent support groups,

or

(b) exclusively grandparents who are currently members of support groups. The Hispanic focus groups were further divided depending on the participants’ preference for speaking English or Spanish (Spanish-speaking or bilingual Spanish preferred). The focus groups were conducted at standard market research facilities across the U.S. All groups were audio and videotaped. Participant confidentiality was assured.

The participants were both male and female (mostly female) grandparents with at least one grandchild under the age of 18 living in their home. These grandparents considered themselves to be the primary caregiver for that child or those children. Grandparents were excluded from the study if they only provided supervision for a grandchild while the child’s parents worked or went to school, only helped out the parent by taking a grandchild back and forth to school, or if a grandchild lived with them because the grandparent was chronically ill, aged, or unable to care for themselves. Their ages ranged from 45 to 76 years, and their marital and employment status varied. Respondents were excluded from the study if they were employed by AARP or in the
fields of advertising, market research or public relations.
Almost all of the Hispanic participants were originally from Latin American countries. The majority of participants were from Mexico and Central America, including El Salvador, Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico and Nicaragua. Several South American countries were also represented, such as Bolivia, Brazil, Uruguay and Ecuador. Many of these Hispanic participants spoke only Spanish.

**Support Group Members’ Perceptions**

**Motivations for Joining A Support Group**

Of the grandparents in this study who currently participate in support groups, the majority have been active members for at least one year. Most attend meetings once a week, although some attend more or less frequently.
Reasons for joining a support group vary, as do the circumstances leading to the decision to join. Some grandparents actively looked for a support group.
Others came across the support group while seeking assistance with a specific problem or issue. For others, the decision to join was more passive: they learned of the support group through a friend, church member or social worker.
Grandparents reported finding support groups in various ways, primarily:

- Word of mouth (a friend, relative or another grandparent caregiver)
- Television or newspaper articles
- An information and referral source (often referred to as a navigator program), local community-based agency or Internet (such as the AARP GIC Support Database)
- Faith-based organization
- Grandchild’s school
- Social services agency
- Advertisement, such as a flyer posted in local business or agency

As mentioned, the need to resolve a specific problem
and/or obtain certain types of information often draws grandparents to a support group. Examples of the types of information grandparents are often seeking include:

- Legal advice, e.g., processes or requirements regarding adoption, legal guardianship, etc.
- Financial assistance
- Respite care
- Educational information such as enrolling their grandchildren in school, tutoring or special learning needs
- Physical and mental health needs, including obtaining health insurance and services for their grandchildren
- Housing
- Enrichment of childrearing skills
- Information and/or services regarding their grandchild’s special needs, such as Down Syndrome, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, Attachment Disorder, etc.

Others are driven more by the need for moral support than for information. Concern about their own emotional well-being underlies their decision to join a support group. Many grandparents in our study indicated that they feel alone — that other grandparents are not raising grandchildren. They often reported feeling alienated both socially and emotionally, and that their friends, who are traditional grandparents not raising their grandchildren, do not understand their situation.

“Basically, I wanted to meet other women who were doing the same thing that I was. Sometimes people don’t understand why you decide to actually take the responsibility for your grandchildren, and there can be some pressure on you. ‘Well, they’re not your children! They’re the parents’ responsibility!’ I knew that I needed to meet other women in the same position I was in.”

Key Benefits from Support Group Participation

Benefits to Grandparents

The benefits associated with support groups are numerous. Most support group members found no downside to being involved in a support group. To a large degree, factors that compel grandparents to remain in a support group are similar to those that prompted them to join in the first place. Members value their support groups because they provide practical information or guidance that is relevant to their situation and an emotional outlet and support — it helps them
to know that they are not alone in this situation. This twofold benefit is pivotal to the support group’s appeal. While some need more of one benefit and less of the other, virtually all members cite both as primary reasons for their continued participation in support groups.

Grandparents state that most of their energy is spent on raising their grandchildren, running a household, and, in many cases, working. They often neglect their own needs. Therefore, they appreciate and benefit from their support group because it allows them to focus on their own needs and validate their importance. They have an opportunity to discuss their concerns, problems, joys and feelings of frustration, grief, anger and resentment — and to do so in a sympathetic, nonjudgmental environment.

Support group members draw strength and encouragement from one another, better equipping them emotionally to deal with hardships and frustrations.

Support groups provide an opportunity for socializing, and by doing so, address yet another important emotional need. Many grandparents report feeling socially isolated, largely because of their special circumstances. Their social life changes drastically when they are thrown back into the activity of raising children and have little time or energy to socialize with other adults. The time, expense and often the futility of finding trustworthy respite care or babysitters limits their social life. Members value their support groups because they enjoy the camaraderie and the opportunity to socialize with peers — and to do so in a largely child-free environment.

However, support groups are not merely a place to vent, commiserate with one another or to socialize. Members often come away with practical information that allows them to address problems causing them emotional stress.

Members value their support groups for the practical information and guidance they provide. While some support groups appear to do a better job than others at providing information, members generally feel that their learning curve has taken an upward trend since joining.

The need for information for grandparents raising grandchildren is substantial. Indeed, grandparents are often overwhelmed by the legal intricacies involved in raising their grandchildren, as well as meeting educational and health needs. Finding information about their legal rights, financial assistance and services available for their grandchildren is a daunting and often exasperating task. Very few grandparents have a central agency or resource center to provide them with all the information they need to raise their grandchildren. Therefore, they find themselves contacting one person or agency after another to obtain a specific piece of information, and often
without success. They feel they are in the dark about many issues, particularly when they initially become responsible for their grandchildren; they don’t even know what questions to ask. Sometimes months or years later they learn about something fairly significant regarding their legal rights or some service that they could have used if they had been aware of it earlier.

Support groups are valued because they are often the best source in the community to help grandparent caregivers acquire information. Some support groups are better than others at providing informational resources. Support groups sponsored by agencies generally provide supplemental services and information. For example, some grandparents reported that the organization that sponsors their support group provides them with an excellent resource center. Members in this group not only acquire information from other grandparents and group leaders during group sessions, they also obtain information from the organization’s resource library, staff members and the special clinics the organization offers such as legal clinics offered once a month. Support group members often associated all the services and assistance they receive with the support group, not drawing a line between support group offerings and those of the sponsoring agency.

For members of other support groups, particularly those that are not sponsored by an agency, information comes largely from fellow group members or group leaders. Some support groups invite guest speakers or experts to talk on a variety of subjects ranging from learning disabilities to legal proceedings to financial assistance.

In some cases, respite care is offered, or special occasions are planned to honor and “treat” the members. Grandparents reported this as an important benefit because they are often so stressed, tired and over-

“I’ve gotten a lot of ideas. We’ve had some huge issues with school this year that were totally overwhelming for the boys and for me. And when you go to these groups, if you need to cry, you can cry. But I’ve gotten a lot of good ideas, too.”
whelmed that they just need a break, and they often don’t focus on doing good things for themselves. Respite care, such as organized activities for grandchildren, benefits the children — but it also benefits the grandparents. Respite gives them time to run errands, go to doctors’ appointments or to rest. One support group offers a special “spa day” for its members. “It’s heavenly!” reported the grandparents who attend, and they look forward to it every year. They return renewed and invigorated.

Benefits to Grandchildren

Grandparents believe that their participation in support groups benefits their grandchildren. Grandchildren profit from the information about services or programs that the support group provides. Grandchildren also benefit from the various child/youth-oriented programs or activities offered by the support group or the sponsoring agency. These might include:

- Support groups for the grandchildren, where they can interact with other children living with their grandparents
- Childcare or activities offered during grandparents’ support group meetings
- Respite activities, such as summer camp or weekend workshops, arts and crafts, sports, tutoring or mentoring

Most support groups offer occasional activities for grandchildren. Some have ongoing programs. The activities for their grandchildren contribute significantly to the appeal of support groups for the grandparents.

Some grandparents feel that grandchildren’s participation in these events or activities provides an important emotional benefit. They believe that seeing that other children are in a similar situation helps their grandchildren cope.

Grandchildren benefit in another way when grandparents participate in support groups. Most members believe that they acquire better childrearing skills as a result of a support group. Many find their grandchildren more challenging to raise than their own children, for a variety of reasons. Many of the grandchildren have spent several formative years being raised by someone else (typically, but not always, their biological parent) who is likely to have had a different childrearing style, expectations and rules. Many of these grandchildren suffer emotional turmoil after dealing with their parent’s divorce, abandonment, incarceration or death. Raising such emotionally scarred chil-
children has its own unique challenges.

Grandparents find that they have to rethink some of the childcare approaches they used on their own children. Many credit their support groups with helping them hone their childcare skills. Through their support groups, they have learned how to communicate better with their grandchildren and how to interpret and deal with negative behavior.

Grandparents believe they are emotionally stronger as a result of their support group, and this, too, ultimately benefits their grandchildren. Many believe that because their support group provides opportunities to vent their frustration, interact with other adults and simply get away for awhile, they are more patient when dealing with their grandchildren. Interestingly, some grandparents report feeling less “guilty” about taking the time for themselves to attend support group meetings because they see it as doing something that will benefit their grandchild.

Unfulfilled Needs

Topping most grandparents’ wish list is a one-stop resource center. When asked to describe the ideal support group, many grandparents immediately mention a centralized resource center where they could obtain a wide range of information and assistance in addition to a support group.

Ideally, this one-stop resource facility would have on-site personnel able to deal with all the issues grandparents and other relative caregivers encounter. Grandparents want legal advisors to walk them through guardianship, custody or adoption; representatives from various social service agencies who will apprise them of the services, programs or benefits available to them and/or their grandchildren; psychologists/therapists who can help them with childcare issues and/or who can work directly with their grandchildren; tutors who can help with a grandchild’s educational needs; housing experts to assist in finding safe, affordable housing.

Other suggestions from grandparents reflect a need for more services or programs for grandchildren. Many grandparents want their support groups (or sponsoring agency) to offer more activities or services that are targeted specifically to children. Grandparents raising teenagers (or soon-to-be teens) expressed this need more than those who are raising younger children. Specific types of programs/services desired for their grandchildren include the following:

“Sometimes the children feel a stigma about living with grandparents and kids in school can say things like, ‘Where’s your mother? Where’s your dad?’ And it can be hurtful to the child who already has this heavy emotional scar to deal with, being separated from their parents. When I joined the support group and they started coming, it was like, ‘Wow! There’s an organization for people in my situation?’ It kind of made them feel like it’s okay; there are a lot of people doing this. So, actually, getting in the group benefited the children psychologically.”
Support groups for grandchildren, segmented by age and led by a qualified therapist/counselor

Social/recreational activities for grandchildren, including weekend programs and camps

Homework/tutoring help

Mentoring programs

Grandparents expressed a desire for ongoing communication via mail — such as a newsletter geared specifically to their issues and needs. Only a few of the support group members in our study currently receive such a newsletter.

Some grandparents suggest improvements that would make it easier for them to attend support groups, including:

Meetings in their neighborhoods or closer to where they live

Options regarding day/time of meetings or activities

Help with transportation to meetings

Telephone support group meetings allowing them to participate from home

“It’s helped me to be calmer in responding to some of his behavior. So I think he benefits from that.”

“I think that it keeps me calmer so that I can cope better with my granddaughter. I would say that’s the main advantage to my grandchild. When I go home, the things that would normally upset me don’t because I’ve talked it over or we’ve said something in the support group that has helped me to become a better person. So it really helps me in associating with (my granddaughter).”
Nonmembers’ Perceptions of Support Groups

Awareness of and Past Participation in Grandparent Support Groups

Roughly three out of ten grandparents who are not currently involved in a grandparent support group (nonmembers) have previously participated in one. In most cases, they attended only three or four meetings. A few stayed with the program for about a year.

Reasons for leaving the support group or program varied. Some claim they did not learn anything and that their needs are not met by “venting” or emotional support alone. Others cite time constraints, conflicts with work hours, logistical barriers or distant meeting locations. In some instances, the support group dissolved. In these cases, grandparents were often disappointed, as they had found the groups helpful and interesting.

Among those grandparent caregivers who have never participated in a grandparent support group, awareness of such groups or organizations is fairly limited. Most don’t know they exist. Those who have some awareness cannot usually specify names, sponsors or locations within their own community. They have a vague recollection of hearing or reading about grandparent support groups in the media or hearing someone mention them.

Barriers to Joining Grandparent Support Groups

Many factors discourage participation in support groups for grandparent caregivers. However, nonparticipation does not necessarily reflect a lack of interest. Many of the nonmembers in this study expressed interest in participating in such groups, yet have failed to do so for numerous reasons:

- **Lack of awareness:** As mentioned earlier, many nonmembers did not know that support groups exist, or had heard about them but did not know that any existed in their community. When support groups were described, participants in the focus groups responded positively that they would find such a group helpful.
Confidentiality: Concerns about confidentiality occasionally discourage grandparents from joining support groups. They don’t want their family’s privacy invaded. Some grandparents feel ashamed that their children are unable to parent their grandchildren. They are hesitant to talk about it with outsiders.

Time/logistical constraints: Some employed grandparents assume that meetings occur during the workday, when they cannot attend. Others feel they just don’t have the time to take on one more activity, no matter how beneficial it might be.

Location/transportation: The time it takes to drive to a group that meets a distance from the grandparent’s home can be a barrier, and in some cases no transportation (private or public) is available.

Criticism of their childrearing skills: Some grandparents do not want to attend a group because they fear that someone will tell them how to raise their grandchildren. They do not want their choices for disciplining their grandchildren to be questioned or criticized.

Dislike for group interaction or negatively focused activities: Some grandparents expressed negativity toward any kind of group activity, and some specifically toward support groups. These grandparents see themselves as not being “joiners.” Many of these grandparents also were turned off by the thought of a group of grandparents focused on “feeling sorry for themselves” and nothing else. Interestingly, when a support group was described as a source for valuable information, many of these grandparents said they would be interested in something of that sort.

“The impression I get when hearing about a support group for grandparents is that we’d sit around and whine about our problem: ‘Where did we go wrong?’ and, ‘I don’t want to go there.’”

Those who have participated in grandparent support groups in the past often cite time constraints and logistical problems as a key reason they stopped attending. In some cases, the group dissolved because there weren’t enough support group members, or the leadership for the group disintegrated. Some cited lack of funding as a reason for the demise of their support group.

There are some common perceptions about support groups for grandparents (and other relatives) raising children that also diminish interest in joining. Nonmembers sometimes make
assumptions based solely on the term “support group.” They assume that the primary (or sole) purpose of a grandparent support group is to provide an emotional outlet for its members. They envision a group of grandparent caregivers meeting periodically to discuss the problems and frustrations they have in common.

Some grandparents have long since come to terms with their situation, and at this stage of their lives, do not think they need whatever therapeutic benefits support groups offer. Still more have a harsher view of support groups, and want no part of them. In their view, a support group for grandparents would amount to a “whine-fest” or “pity party,” a place to complain about the bad hand they have been dealt.

Whether they personally see value in emotional support, this very narrow view of support groups discourages many individuals from participating.

Another fairly common misconception about grandparent support groups is that, in addition to providing an emotional outlet, their focus is primarily on teaching (or reteaching) childrearing skills. Many nonmember grandparents feel that they have little to learn since they have already raised their own children.

Some grandparents do not feel the need for a support group due to one or more of the following reasons:

Ê They have dealt with legal issues, and do not have significant financial problems or other challenges in raising their grandchildren. They may use support services for their grandchildren, as any parent might, but they do not feel they need support focused specifically on grandparents or other relative caregivers.

Ê Their grandchildren came to live with them at infancy, and they now tend to perceive them as their “children” rather than grandchildren. In many cases, the biological parent(s) is out of the picture. They see themselves as somewhat older-than-average parents. Therefore, they do not readily identify with an organization or support group for grandparents raising grandchildren.

Ê Some nonmembers had been part-time caregivers for their grandchildren for years before officially assuming the role full time. They cared for their grandchildren while their parent(s) worked, and/or shared their home with their grandchildren and the children’s parent(s). At some point, the parent(s) slipped out of the picture. Since the
grandparents were already acclimated to living with and caring for their grandchildren, they did not see their role or lifestyle as changing dramatically.

Some grandparents have children of their own still living at home. They were thrust into raising their grandchildren while still actively parenting their own children. The lifestyle and mindset of these grandparents were still fairly child-oriented when their grandchildren came to live with them. The transition was somewhat easier for them. They feel less need for outside support.

Some nonmembers have a strong support system of extended family and friends. This family network usually consists of female relatives — the grandparents’ own mothers, sisters, and aunts — who not only provide emotional support but also much needed respite. They routinely provide care for the grandchildren, take them on outings, or have them for overnights. In some instances, the biological parent is part of this network. For these grandparents, their extended family is their support group. Largely because of this familial support, these individuals are likely to feel less overwhelmed by the daunting task of raising grandchildren.

However, many grandparents were still interested in support groups when they heard about them in the focus groups and especially when they were described as a source of helpful information.

Motivational Elements Encouraging Participation in Support Groups

Despite the numerous misconceptions and obstacles that discourage participation, the majority of nonmembers expressed interest in grandparent support groups if they provided the right package of information, benefits or services. In describing the ideal support group, nonmembers’ requirements or needs are very similar to those of members. Many of the benefits nonmembers would like to receive from support groups mirror those that current members feel they do receive. Nonmembers’ descriptions of ideal support groups reflect the same needs as members: childcare/babysitting service during meetings and other adult functions, transportation to/from meetings, and various options in terms of meeting days/times.

Nonmembers typically envision the benefits of support groups in two categories: emotional and informational. Most nonmembers expect the primary or sole function of a support group to be interaction with others in a similar situation, for emotional and moral support. They expect the informational component to be (in the words of nonmembers) less “touchy-feely” in nature and more “practical” or “solution-oriented.” They expect information and guidance on the myriad of issues and obstacles that grandparents face. The issues are generally the same for members and nonmembers, including legal advice, financial assistance, education, health, and behavior problems.
Members and nonmembers desire similar offerings from support groups. However, nonmembers tend to be more emphatic about the need for helpful information.

Nonmembers and members alike want a one-stop resource center providing information or advice about the challenges they face. Rather than making numerous phone calls and running from one agency to another, they would like to call or visit one resource center to get all the information and referrals they need. Some nonmembers would like on-site staffing, while others would be satisfied with referrals to the appropriate agency or person. Nonmembers show great interest in simplifying the time-consuming and often futile task of finding accurate and helpful information. It is also clear that both members and nonmembers are often misinformed or never locate needed information.

Grandparent caregivers are also interested in a 24-hour hotline that they could use at any time. The types of information sought are similar for both members and nonmembers and cover a wide variety of the issues and challenges they face. However, the most sought-after information tends to fall into one of three categories: legal options, financial assistance options, and services or programs relating to children’s mental/physical health and educational needs.

Nonmembers’ interest in participating in a support group is often contingent on the caliber or qualifications of its leaders or organizers. Many nonmembers stipulate that the groups must be run by professionals with relevant credentials and experience, such as psychologists, counselors and social workers. Similarly, they expect experts in various fields such as family law attorneys, teachers, child psychologists or guidance counselors to speak, at least occasionally, at the support group meetings. This requirement underscores nonmembers’ need for relevant information and advice and reflects some nonmembers’ disparaging image of support groups as people sitting around exchanging sad stories. Many nonmembers have little faith in the advice given by other grandparents. They would rather hear from qualified, experienced professionals. They believe that their advice/information is more likely to bring about the desired change or result. Many nonmembers see merit in joining a support group if it would help them raise and interact more effectively with their grandchildren.

Many nonmembers would like grandparent support groups to take a holistic family approach in terms of the counseling services they offer. Like members, many nonmembers are very interested in having age-segmented support groups for grandchildren (for all the same reasons members mentioned).

“I think an attractive feature would be if there was more than just talking. Like if you could get some answers out of it. Maybe there’s a psychiatrist or therapist there, so it’s more of a therapy session. Because when I hear ‘support,’ I see just talking. And maybe for some people, that really helps, but sometimes you need an answer.”
In addition they would like:

- Joint counseling with grandparents and grandchildren, either in a support group format or in private sessions with individual families
- Counseling for biological parents
- One-on-one counseling
Currently, it is all but impossible to attain an exact count of the number of support groups for grandparents who are raising grandchildren. Presently, there are no known national surveys of grandparents raising grandchildren support groups. Consequently, there is very little literature or data regarding the characteristics of support groups for grandparents raising grandchildren.

In an effort to gather such information the AARP Grandparent Information Center conducted a national mail survey of grandparent support groups. Surveys were sent directly to support group leaders. Support group leaders were asked to provide information about the geographic location of their support groups. They were also asked to provide other important information about their support groups, such as:

- Ethnic/racial composition of support group
- Meeting frequency
- Services offered
- Sponsoring agencies/organizations
- Year founded
- Number of members

A more detailed presentation of the findings follows the Summary of Survey Findings section.

**Methods**

In June 2003 the Grandparent Information Center conducted a national mail survey*. The mail survey was sent to organizations and agencies that offer support groups for grandparents raising grandchildren. A total of 236 organizations responded to the survey.

All survey analyses were conducted by AARP’s Knowledge Management, Strategic Issue Research staff, and Marketing and Research Resources, Inc.

For tabulation purposes, percentage points have been rounded off to the nearest whole number. As a result, percentages in a given table column may total slightly higher or lower than 100%. In questions that permit multiple responses, columns may total significantly more than 100%, depending on the number of different responses offered by each respondent. When only selected responses are shown, percentages may total less than 100%.

*A more extensive explanation of our methods is available upon request.
Summary of Survey Findings

- Almost half (45%) of the agencies are located in an urban area.

- Nearly three-fourths of agencies are sponsored by one or more parent agency. Public agencies, aging organizations and community-based agencies provide the most sponsorship.

- Almost nine in ten agencies (87%) for grandparents or other relatives raising children provide in-person support groups with six in ten providing child care or youth activities while grandparents or relatives attend these meetings.

- Organizations with grandparents or other relatives raising children seem to place similar emphasis on providing information/training and support groups; while, agencies working with grandparents with visitation issues focus more on information.

- More than half of support group meetings occur once a month. Close to three in ten groups meet more frequently (14% once a week, 15% every other week).

- Registration for the majority of the groups is relatively small, with a median of 16 for the grandparents group and six for other relatives.

- Based on the registration median, a large number of registered grandparents and other relatives generally attend the meetings.

- The majority of group participants are Caucasian (56%) followed by African American (34%) and Hispanic (8%).

- Native Americans make up 2% of support groups that responded to the survey.

- Seven of ten (69%) respondents registered for support groups are between the ages of 50 and 70.

- Seven in ten (68%) of the groups are still within their first five years of operation, while 17% have been established for ten or more years.

- Only two in ten groups have had a lapse in meetings since becoming established.
Nearly three-fourths of support group leaders are professionally trained; and, over four in ten (42%) are considered peers.

Various media and flyers are the two predominant methods of communicating to the community about the group and/or its services.

Half of the support groups organize or sponsor conferences or workshops for professionals who work with grandparents and other relatives raising children.

Email is the most preferred method overall for contacting group representatives.

**Census Region Notes:**
- Groups in the Northeast region are more likely to have been established in 1999 or earlier.
- The South has newer groups (established 2000-2003) and less frequent meetings (more often occur once per month or fewer).
- In the West, groups are more likely to meet more than once per month.

**Geographic Notes:**
- Groups that classify themselves as urban prefer phone contact and are more likely to have professionally trained leaders, but are less likely to be sponsored.
- When asked what information would be helpful, urban groups were more likely to want housing information.
- Suburban groups are more likely to be sponsored, with community-based sponsorships more predominant.

**Sponsorship Notes:**
- Not surprisingly, sponsored groups are more likely to have a professionally trained leader, but leaders are less likely to be peers.
- Nonsponsored groups are more likely to have a peer as a leader.
- School-based sponsorship occurs more among newer groups (those established between 2000 and 2003).

**Group Tenure Notes:**
- More established groups (1999 or prior) prefer mail contact over newer groups.
- Established groups offering services to those raising children are more likely than newer groups to provide telephone support group meetings.
Figure 5
(n=201)
*In which type of geographic area is your group located?*

![Pie chart showing geographic area distribution: 45% Urban, 28% Rural, 26% Suburban.]

Figure 6
(n=233; n=168 respectively)
*Is your organization sponsored by one or more parent organization(s) or agency (ies)?*

![Pie chart showing sponsorship distribution: 72% Yes, 28% No.]
Figure 7
(n=235; n=85 respectively)

Please tell us what type of services and/or activities your organization currently provides for the following groups of people:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Services</th>
<th>Grandparents or other relatives raising children</th>
<th>Grandparents with visitation issues</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Information/Training [Net]</td>
<td>91%</td>
<td>84%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information and referral or navigation</td>
<td>82%</td>
<td>79%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conferences, workshops or other training</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newsletter</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support Groups [Net]</td>
<td>90%</td>
<td>72%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In-person support group meetings</td>
<td>87%</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child care/youth activities while grandparent attends support group meetings</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transportation to support group meetings</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Telephone support group meetings</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legislative advocacy</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legal advice</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respite care</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Languages [Net]</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spanish language available</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other languages available</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health services</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other services or activities</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Figure 8**
(n=197)
*How frequently does your support group meet?*

![Bar chart showing the frequency of support group meetings]

- 28% meet once a week
- 56% meet every other week
- 14% meet once a month
- 14% meet every other month
- 2% meet other

**Figure 9**
(n=197; n=152 respectively)
*Approximately how many grandparents are registered for your group? Approximately how many other relatives are registered for your group?*

![Bar chart showing the number of grandparents and other relatives]

- Grandparents (Median=16)
- Other Relatives (Median=6)

- 82% of grandparents are registered
- 37% of other relatives are registered
- 27% of grandparents are registered
- 20% of other relatives are registered
Figure 10
(n=194)
*How many grandparents or other relatives are generally in attendance at your meetings?*

Median=9

Figure 11
(n=136)
*Approximately what is the racial/ethnic background or participants who are registered for your support group?*
Figure 12  
(n=170) 
*Please tell us how many registered support group registrants fall into each age range listed below.*

![Age Distribution Chart](image)

Figure 13  
(n=194)  
*In what year was your group established?*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2000-2003 [Net]</td>
<td>51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002-2003</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999 or Prior [Net]</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998-1999</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996-1997</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993-1995</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992 or prior</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 14
(n=206)
At any time since your support group has been established has there been a period of time when meetings were not held for more than three months?

Figure 15
(n=202)
Is the leader(s)/facilitator(s) of the support group professionally trained?

Figure 16
(n=201)
Is the leader(s)/facilitator(s) of your support group considered a peer of your support group participants?
Figure 17
(n=206)
What types of outreach do you do to inform your community of your support group meetings/services?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Media [Net]</th>
<th>84%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Newspaper [Subnet]</td>
<td>76%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newspaper articles</td>
<td>66%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newspaper advertisements</td>
<td>49%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radio</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TV</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flyers</td>
<td>79%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer recruiters</td>
<td>61%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Events</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 18
(n=204)
Does your organization/agency organize or sponsor conferences or workshops regarding grandparents and other relatives raising children for professionals who work for them?
**Figure 19**
(n=230)
*Which types of information might we provide which would be helpful to you and/or the grandparents or other relatives you serve?*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Information</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Information about legal assistance</td>
<td>88%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information about financial assistance for grandparents or other relatives raising children</td>
<td>87%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health/Health Insurance (Net)</td>
<td>79%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General health information for grandparents</td>
<td>64%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General health information for grandchildren</td>
<td>63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health insurance information</td>
<td>62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information about education issues for grandchildren</td>
<td>74%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information about dealing with learning disabilities</td>
<td>73%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information about attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General child-rearing information</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information about daycare or before/after school care</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information about outreach to minority populations</td>
<td>51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housing information</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 20**
(n=230)
*I prefer to be contacted by . . .*

- Email: 60%
- U.S. Mail: 30%
- Phone: 26%