

Mountain (Grand)Mamas: Grandparents Raising Grandchildren During the Opioid Epidemic in Appalachian America and Their Portrayal in Media

Rosemary Kelley & Dr. Ginny Whitehouse, Eastern Kentucky University Department of Communication



ABSTRACT

Deep within the hills of Appalachia, grandparents are stepping into the familiar role of parenting as many have become the primary caregivers for their grandchildren. These grandparent-headed households (GHHs), a form of kinship care, have increased largely in response to the opioid epidemic that has ravaged the region. These families face numerous challenges, including an increased risk of poverty, lack of food security, and social isolation. However, despite these challenges, many grandparent caregivers appreciate and acknowledge the benefits of raising grandchildren.

Mass media also has an impact on these caregiver situations, as journalists serve as the gatekeepers of information to audiences. By performing a content analysis of Kentucky news organizations and their coverage of grandparent-headed households, over a period of six years, alongside personal journalistic written coverage a podcast titled “Homestead”, I will demonstrate the negative impact of Appalachian opioid use on children and the creation of GHHs, and the issue’s overarching portrayal in media.

APPROACH

Content Analysis: A content analysis of 16 print newspapers with online presence located within the 22 counties in the service region of Eastern Kentucky University. Qualitative data, including language and themes, was gathered from 2017 to the present, as a majority of publication websites did not contain results before that date.

Journalistic Coverage: Through interviews with actors in the Kentucky kinship care system, as well as individuals caring for grandchildren, I undertook an in-depth examination of issues facing families across the region in a journalistic article. Context to these issues was provided by an analysis of Appalachia's opioid crisis and the way in which Kentucky kinship care is funded.

Personal/Photo Essay: As a child raised by grandparents within Kentucky's kinship care program, I saw it as important to share my own experiences within the system and connection to Appalachia's opioid crisis. This was done through both a personal essay and photos detailing my experiences.

"Homestead" Podcast: Sharing the stories and experiences of my grandparents was just as important as sharing my own. Through audio interviews with them, I was able to share their experiences in their own words.

RESULTS

Content Analysis: The evaluation of a total of 28 articles yielded a number of prevalent themes. Themes included:

- A correlation between substance abuse and kinship care within Appalachia, and the overall negative impact the opioid epidemic has on both grandparents and grandchildren.
- The increasing rates of kinship care and its traumatic nature were often viewed as a crisis.
- Calls to system-wide improvement were common.
- Medically incorrect terminology when referring to the nature of addiction and substance use.

Journalistic Coverage: Interviews with caregivers and actors within the kinship care system revealed that many families struggle with providing funding and resources for the children they care for, situations that are a frequent result of parental drug addiction. Many were left to recover and navigate new avenues of funding alone following changes in early 2013.

Managing the relationships between parents and children and mental health struggles in children and their caregivers creates added strain within these families.

CONCLUSION

Kentucky's kinship care system and the families who are a part of it continue to struggle with resources, funding and mental healthcare for both grandparents and grandchildren. Intertwined within the system remains Appalachia's opioid epidemic and families struggle with navigating relationships following grandchild placement. News coverage of the topic remains minimal and occasionally misleading, and the culture relating to the opioid epidemic must improve to institute lasting change.

As a child raised within the system, and based the work performed in this thesis, change with Kentucky's kinship care is necessary to properly support and assist families.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I want to thank my family, friends and peers for supporting me throughout this personal work. Special thanks to the advisors and staff of the *Eastern Progress*, the ECU Honors Program and my mentor, Dr. Ginny Whitehouse.



Zoe sits in her bedroom in the home of her grandparents turned adoptive parents. She is one of the over 90,000 children in kinship care in Kentucky, many of whom remain in the care of grandparents as a result of parental substance abuse.

Kenneth sits in the kitchen of his family's home. Often, he says, the family struggled to make ends meet while raising five grandchildren, but they received support through their church, Kirksville Baptist, and other community resources.



(From left): Paulette, Zoe and Kenneth Kelley sit on their front porch, built by Kenneth himself. Zoe and her sisters, Rosemary and Gracy, were officially adopted by the couple in 2017.

Denise's father, Kenneth, looks at an old photograph of his daughter. Denise has long struggled with addiction and substance use and until recently, remained in active rehabilitation.



Kenneth and wife, Paulette, have been married for over twenty years. Collectively, they have 13 children together, five of whom are adopted grandchildren previously placed in their care by the Kentucky Department of Community Based Services (DCBS).