

Introduction

Sylvia exemplifies many of the Black¹ women raising their grandchildren in skipped-generation households (consisting only of grandparents and grandchildren) who are featured in this book. Compelled to raise two-year-old Zoe, the forty-one-year-old grandmother experienced a transformation in the role meanings and expectations she associated with grandmotherhood, confronted the paradox of fulfilling the social and legal functions of motherhood without the legal rights to do so, and grappled with the financial and personal costs of raising another generation. When I interviewed Sylvia, she had been raising Zoe almost since the day she was born (see table 1 at the end of the chapter). Although Sylvia came from a long line of intensive grandmothering (the assumption of responsibilities and aspects of child-rearing typically associated with parenting),² she still vacillated between disbelief and dismay at her situation. She had been fifteen years old when her mother, Eleanor, left her substance-abusing father. Unable to provide for her eleven children without support from her husband, Eleanor had moved her family into Robert Taylor Homes public housing in Chicago. She made do by combining public assistance with contributions from her parents, who not only helped with Sylvia and her siblings but also provided them refuge. By doing what

they could to buttress their daughter's single-mother status in public housing and to ensure the welfare of their grandchildren, Sylvia's grandparents shaped her early ideas about the place and importance of grandparents.

Eleanor, too, engaged in intensive grandmothering—Sylvia raised her children in the same public housing projects where she came of age, and while she didn't lose the father of her three oldest children to drug addiction, she did lose him to the drug trade (he was serving a twenty-year prison sentence for drug dealing). As a young, unmarried mother, Sylvia stayed home with Eleanor. When her oldest child was almost school age, Sylvia rented an apartment near her mother in Robert Taylor Homes.

History repeated itself when Sylvia's nineteen-year-old daughter Shanice remained home after the birth of her first child—three generations of Black mothering shaped by an intersection of personal, cultural (e.g., expectations of motherhood), and structural (e.g., poverty, racial and gender inequality) forces. Although Sylvia was still raising her two younger children, she anticipated providing parenting support to her young, unmarried daughter, who lacked a place of her own. While her family's custom of intensive grandmothering prepared Sylvia for a multifaceted and hands-on role as a grandmother, it did not prepare her for raising a newborn.

Before Shanice left three-month-old Zoe in Sylvia's permanent care, Sylvia tried following her own mother's example by providing her daughter with parental guidance. However, unlike the dynamic between Sylvia and Eleanor, Sylvia's advice created friction, as has been documented in other studies on the dynamics between young Black mothers and their mothers.³ When Shanice moved out, Sylvia shifted from providing parenting support to assuming a surrogate parent role.

Sylvia was blamed by her family and friends for assuming Shanice's parenting responsibilities. "Because she got a mama who doin' it for her, that's what a lot of people say." Nevertheless, her dilemma—the choice between raising her granddaughter or risking her safety by letting her be with her mother—elaborates the manifestation of coercion: "They don't understand. I'm not finna make her take my grandbaby nowhere that it ain't safe . . . just so I can say she with her mommy. Then I'm still worried. . . . What's happening? What's goin' on? That ain't gonna help me. I'd

be outside on the bus looking for them. Nah, I'll be super worried about my grandbaby." This dilemma was further complicated by Sylvia's contradictory emotions:

Hmm. Well, I love my grandbaby. I love her to death. I tell people, "I love her dirty Pamper." . . . And I wouldn't let her go nowhere or let nobody hurt her. So, I enjoy raising her. . . . Even though it's stressful, but I still love her. But she wouldn't be nowhere else, and she won't never go in the [child welfare] system.

Sylvia cared for Zoe because she loved "her to death," but also because, given the circumstances (e.g., a mother who walked away, safety concerns, fear of Zoe ending up "in the system" [child welfare system]), she didn't feel she had a choice.

Notwithstanding her ambivalence about raising her granddaughter, Sylvia did not lack clarity about legalizing their relationship. Because she was invested in Shanice eventually reclaiming her child, Sylvia maintained her private kinship arrangement by devising strategies to access child-rearing institutions, despite her lack of legal authority. Although Sylvia did not have to worry about school, she did need to procure medical services and the child's WIC (Women's, Infants, and Children supplemental nutrition program) benefits. So, Sylvia became Zoe's WIC proxy by writing a letter permitting herself to access formal resources, signing her daughter's name, and getting the document notarized. She also strategized how to use Zoe's medical card for doctor's appointments. "Well they ask me, 'Is you the grandmother?' and I say, 'Well I don't know where she [the mother] at and she's sick and I got the medical card and I got my ID, so' . . ."

Compounding these challenges, Sylvia had been unable to work since assuming care for Zoe. Since the jobs she qualified for were insufficient to pay her living expenses and childcare, she, like many young poor parents, made the difficult choice between working a low-wage job and paying for childcare or remaining home with her non-school-aged grandchild. However, Sylvia could not apply for subsidized childcare because her daughter received the child's public assistance and the state provides aid for a child to only one caregiver. When parents refuse to relinquish children's resources, grandmothers must provide proof of physical or legal custody to get the

resources their grandchildren deserve. Many grandmothers in these circumstances feared pursuing legal guardianship because they did not want the mother to retaliate by removing the child from their custody. So, the decision to forgo resources to protect grandchildren was complicated and coercive, preventing some grandmothers from receiving the cash assistance for which they were eligible. Because Sylvia had no cash income, her saving grace was Section 8 and Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program benefits. In addition, she relied on her extended family and her partner to make ends meet.

Since Sylvia's expectation of grandmotherhood had been of a peripheral or, at most, a supporting role to Shanice, she struggled with depression, feeling trapped—literally at home with her granddaughter day in and day out. Although Zoe was a happy child, her separation anxiety compromised Sylvia's ability to take breaks; to care for Zoe, Sylvia gave up not only working but also other parts of her life, including time with family and friends, and prioritizing her intimate relationship. As Sylvia waited and hoped that her daughter would get herself together and take care of her child, she exercised agency to determine *how* she and Zoe waited, in this case, in a private kinship arrangement that provided an avenue to one day regain control of the direction of her life.

*Grandmothering While Black: A Twenty-First Century Story of Love, Coercion, and Survival*⁴ interrogates how racial, gender, and economic inequality shape mothering among women like Eleanor, Sylvia, and Shanice and how effects of those inequalities are passed on to their children, necessitating intensive grandmothering and skipped-generation households among African Americans. This book investigates how role meanings and expectations of grandmotherhood among Black women are influenced by the unique cultural and structural forces that shape Black families. Furthermore, it illuminates the family circumstances and dynamics, as well as the public policies, that have contributed to morphing the traditional roles of Black grandmothers into a parenting role devoid of the legal obligations and rights held by parents. *Grandmothering While Black* examines the ways in which Black grandmothers experience what I call “coerced mothering” across a range of caregiving arrangements, and their strategies for managing legal marginalization vis-à-vis parents and the state. It also delves into the costs of grandparent caregiving and

the coping strategies grandmothers use to reduce the financial and personal price they pay for parenting another generation. Finally, the book addresses the following questions: *Why* are largely poor, Black women like Sylvia taking on surrogate parenting roles despite the gravity of their personal struggles? *What* meanings and expectations do these women associate with the grandmother role? *Why* and *how* do Black women's traditional grandmother roles morph into surrogate parenting? *What* challenges do today's Black grandmothers face that distinguish their grandparent caregiving experiences from those of their mothers and grandmothers? *How* do they manage the demands of caregiving, including their lack of legal rights, challenges to making ends meet, and inability to prioritize their personal lives?

To understand the experiences of grandparents raising grandchildren in skipped-generation households, from 2007 to 2011 I conducted in-depth interviews with seventy-four Black grandmothers. I also completed participant-observation sessions in caregiving-prominent sites (e.g., doctor's visits, welfare office appointments, school and day-care center meetings, appointments with caseworkers, and so on). The average age of grandmothers was fifty-five years, they were raising an average of 1.81 grandchildren for an average of 5.25 years, and had an average of 3.51 children. Eighteen were married, twenty-three were divorced, four were in long-term partnerships, four were separated, six were widows, and the rest were single. At the time of data collection, twenty of the women reported annual household incomes higher than \$15,000 and the rest were impoverished. The federal poverty level (FPL) during the years of data collection for families of two, three, four, and eight were \$13,690, \$17,170, \$20,650, and \$34,570, respectively. Seventeen of the twenty women who reported income above the FPL had incomes of approximately 1.5 times the FPL, and three had annual household incomes more than two times the FPL. Twenty-six of the women were working at the time of recruitment, fourteen were retired, and the rest were unemployed.

Over my four-year course of interviews and ethnography with these women on Chicago's South Side, my research questions and my understanding of their experiences evolved. For starters, they faced graver adversities than previous research documented, and they faced more adversities than the women themselves expected. Furthermore, despite

coming from families steeped in intensive grandmothering and grandparent caregiving, most women had little context for their own caregiving, which departed significantly from that of their historic counterparts, including women in their own families. In the span of a generation, their grandchildren's circumstances, the increased demand to legalize relationships with grandchildren, and the symbolic and actual threat of their grandchildren ending up in the child welfare system had changed.

This book is critical to any understanding of not only Black grandmothers raising their grandchildren but also the complex kinship care (see table 2 at the end of the chapter⁵) system within which they must do so. When I finished collecting data, I understood that categorizing these families as skipped-generation households was a woefully inadequate expression of these grandmothers' experiences. Because of the implications for their legal rights and responsibilities, access to resources and services, and degree of privacy and autonomy, it was critical to identify and specify their caregiving arrangements (e.g., private, legal guardianship, kinship foster care, subsidized guardianship, adoption, and such) with their grandchildren. I argue that, within any of these caregiving arrangements, grandparents have only what I refer to as "quasi-legal rights"—that is, grandparents have no inherent or pre-given legal rights to their grandchildren, but rather must rely on and share any legal rights they obtain with parents and the state. For this reason, by theorizing the quasi-legal rights that frame grandparents' caregiving arrangements, *Grandmothering While Black* highlights the centrality of the legal system in delineating the possibilities and limits of Black grandmothering, especially the precariousness of the complex kinship care system within which they raise their grandchildren.

When grandmothers are coerced into increasing their child-rearing responsibilities beyond their desired level of intensity and their capacity to sustain, implications for the economic, social, mental, and physical well-being of not only these women but also of the generation of children in their care come into question. Indeed, both become canaries in the coal mine. Aspects of their experiences portend the future for other grandparents: the tension between their role meanings and expectations for grandparenthood and their lived experience, the negotiation of caregiving arrangements with parents and the state, and the array of strategies they implement as they negotiate parenting responsibilities for their grand-

children, navigate child-rearing institutions, manage interpersonal relationships, and meet their grandchildren's economic needs. As I highlight how enduring US practices of racial, gender, and class discrimination in public policy making contribute to the insurmountable challenges these women must confront, I also impart lessons about the implications of these policies for grandparents raising grandchildren in skipped-generation households from other racial and ethnic groups. Specifically, why skipped-generation households experience higher poverty rates compared to other families, are systematically excluded from already inadequate public assistance programs, and must devise innovative practices to protect and care for their grandchildren without the legal rights to do so.

STUDYING GRANDPARENT CAREGIVING

More grandparents are currently raising their grandchildren than at any other time in American history.⁶ Researchers, policy makers, practitioners (e.g., nonprofit employees, social workers, caseworkers, mental health and health care providers, attorneys, and so on), and community organizers and leaders have sought to understand the prevalence and demographic characteristics of grandparent-headed households (children living in a grandparent's home, with or without a parent) as well as the factors contributing to this increase. They have also investigated the form and function of different types of grandparent-headed households and how such families fare within and outside of the child welfare system, as well as the social, economic, and health vulnerabilities these families experience.

Prevalence and Demographic Characteristics

The share of US children living in a grandparent's household has more than doubled from 3.2 percent in 1970 to 8.4 percent in 2019 (74 percent live in three-generation grandparent-headed households and 26 percent in skipped-generation households).⁷ A recent paper published by social welfare policy professors Mariana Amorim, Rachel Dunifon, and Natasha Pilkauskas shows that these point-in-time estimates *underestimate* the number of children who live with their grandparents at some

point and downplay the magnitude and importance of coresidence with grandparents in American children's lives.⁸ The authors found that nearly 30 percent of US children live with grandparents at some point.⁹ Approximately 5 percent of these children will live in skipped-generation households and 24.6 percent will live in three-generation households.¹⁰

Both three-generation and two-generation living arrangements are more prevalent among racial and ethnic minorities. In 2019, approximately 2.5 million grandparents reported responsibility for their grandchildren's needs.¹¹ Although African Americans comprise only 13 percent of the US population, in 2019 they accounted for 20.2 percent of grandparent-headed households (down from 24 percent in 2010 and 28 percent in 2000).¹² They are more likely than other racial and ethnic groups to raise grandchildren in skipped-generation households.¹³ One in ten Black children ends up in a skipped-generation household, double the rate of the next highest group (Latinos, at 5 percent).¹⁴

Contributing Factors

Reasons for the increase in grandparent-headed households (and in skipped-generation households in particular) are attributed to three leading factors: (1) generational needs, specifically the support needs of the parent generation, (2) changes in social welfare policies, and (3) changes in child welfare system policies and practices. The first reason includes unprecedented sociodemographic trends—such as increases in single parenthood, declining marriage rates, rising divorce rates, increasing life expectancy, and declining birth rates—that have changed family life and increased the need for grandparent involvement among all racial and ethnic groups. However, African American grandparents in the twenty-first century are more likely than their predecessors and other racial and ethnic groups to be part of kinship networks composed of single-parent female-headed households. Between 1960 and 1980, the number of Black children living with a single parent increased from 9.9 to 20.5 percent, compared with 5.1 to 7.1 percent for White children.¹⁵ In 2017, 65 percent of Black children were being raised by single parents, compared with 24 percent of White children.¹⁶

Generational needs also emerge from the social problems the parent generation contends with, including economic factors such as unemploy-

ment and underemployment, concentrated poverty, and racial discrimination in the labor market and earnings. Research has also identified parental death, mental and physical health issues, teen pregnancy, and child abuse and neglect as additional reasons for increasing numbers of grandparents raising their grandchildren.¹⁷

Previous research has identified causal connections between specific social problems and the rise in grandparent caregiving among African Americans, including the crack-cocaine epidemic of the 1980s and 1990s¹⁸ and subsequent criminal justice policies that fueled mass incarceration.¹⁹ Similarly, the opioid epidemic (1999 to the present) triggered a rise in grandparent caregiving. Initially, it hit rural and suburban, largely White communities, but later disproportionately affected American Indian/Alaska Native and African American communities.²⁰ As the number of incarcerated mothers more than tripled from 1985 to 2000, foster care caseloads more than doubled, compelling grandparents to care for as many as two-thirds of their grandchildren.²¹ Studies that focus on the minor children of incarcerated women, including though not limited to those in the foster care system, indicate that approximately half of these children are being raised by their grandparents, and most often maternal grandmothers.²² Further contributions to the overrepresentation of African Americans among grandparent-headed households include state-sanctioned violence (e.g., police brutality), residential segregation, and the HIV/AIDS epidemic.

The second reason relates to social welfare reforms, such as the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act, which aimed to move mothers from welfare to work and required unmarried teenage mothers to live with an adult (usually a parent). Economists Christopher Swann and Michelle Sylvester demonstrate that while previous literature often points to the AIDS and crack-cocaine epidemics as the principal causes of the increase in foster care caseloads during the 1980s, the most important factors were higher rates of female incarceration and decreases in welfare benefits.²³ Since the mid-1970s, neoliberalism has characterized US economic and social welfare policies. Social work professor Mimi Abramovitz is among many researchers and policy makers to show that it “has transformed social welfare policy in ways that undermine the delivery of social services, increase poverty and inequality, and create serious hardship for