

## Some kinship carers' lives get easier but most suffer ongoing hardship

### 1 Introduction

In 2011 KCV established a longitudinal study of the lives kinship carers. The kinship carers in the study will be interviewed every twelve months and asked about changes in their lives.

The results of this study are used to inform the work program of KCV. The results are also be used to inform a range of decision makers with the power to affect the lives of kinship families.

### 2 Scope of the survey

The total number of interviews conducted in 2011 for the longitudinal study was 112. Contact has been lost with 16 of these cases. This means that the total number of return interviews conducted in 2012 was 96. These interviews covered 141 carers who were caring for 150 children/young people and between them.

### 3 Changes in the lives of carers from 2011 to 2012

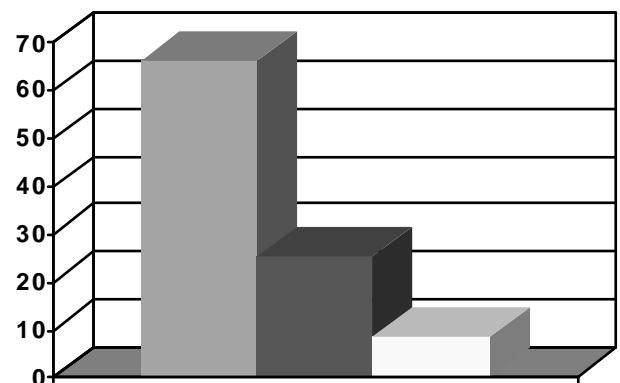
In 2012 the following statistical trends in the lives of the carers were identified:

- > 40.5% of carers reported **deterioration** in the lives of their lives. This affects 38.7% of the children/young people in the survey.
- > 25.5 % of carers reported **no changes** in their lives. This affects 28.7 % of the children/young people in the survey.
- > 25.5% of carers reported **improvement** in their lives. This affects 26.6 % of the children/young people in the survey
- > 8.5% reported that they were **uncertain** about the effect of the changes on their lives. This affects 06% of the children/young people in the survey.

### 4 The majority of carers are struggling

The 25.5% of carers who reported in 2012 that there were no changes in their lives were all experiencing difficulties in 2011 when they first joined the study. Taking these carers together with those who reported in 2012 that their lives had deteriorated (40.5%) adds up to a large number of carers who are experiencing real hardship.

The table diagram below shows a comparison of carers who are experiencing difficulty (66%) with those who are uncertain (8.5%) and those who report improvements in their lives (25.5%).



### 5 Carers who are uncertain about changes

Where the carers were uncertain circumstances the children in their care had been taken out of kinship care. Of the 96 carers re-interviewed in 2012 **25** carers reported that the **22** children/young people being raised between them were no longer in their care.

The carers reported the following attitude towards the children's' future prospects:

- >**Negative** for 10 children/young people
- >**Uncertain** for 9 children/young people
- >**Positive** for 3 children/young people

Only a small minority of carers in this group reported that they had no physical or emotional concerns for the children or young people in their care.

A large number reported emotional concerns using words key words: *depression, anger, trauma behaviours and abandonment issues*

Physical concerns raised included:

- > occasional illness or permanent disability
- > children born with drug addiction or foetal alcohol syndrome
- > issues relating to weight and healthy diet

Some carers noted that these issues led to the children or young people in their care struggling at school, and a significant number indicated that they were struggling with either the emotional or financial cost of raising children and young people with such issues.

In spite of this, some positives were reported. Some carers reported

- children or young people doing better at school
- children or young people receiving appropriate counselling or medical treatment
- children or young people participating in activities
- better financial assistance being received

It is important to note that these minor victories in no way balanced out the negative circumstances experienced by these families.

A number of carers in this group indicated that they believed their situation could be improved by having more settled custody arrangements, whether this be a permanent care arrangement in their current situation, or a reconciliation with the child or young person's parents.

Significant numbers of carers also reported that they would like to see improvements in the child or young person's emotional state, behaviour and educational success.

## 9 The importance of Support Groups

A large majority of carers across the whole survey sample indicated that they are connected to support groups, and are very happy with the level of support they are receiving from these groups.

A number of carers noted that they would like to attend support groups, but are unable to do so due to concerns such as

- being too busy
- not having groups near their location
- groups only being run in regular working hours

Some carers noted that there seems to be a one-size-fits-all mentality when it comes to providing kinship care support groups. A range of carers have a range of needs however, and concerns about the location and timing of groups mean not all carers have access to this support. Several carers suggested that they would benefit from some form of online support, for example an online chat forum that they could access at a time and place convenient for them.

A small minority of carers noted that due to the age and level of stability of the children/young people in their care, they did not feel the need to attend support groups.

Other issues also exist, for example, a small number of carers indicated that they had previously attended a group which is currently in a transition period, but had chosen to no longer attend due to conflicts with the changing dynamic of the group.

## 10 Improvements required

Across the board carers are seeking better access to services. Financial concerns are by far the most common, as carers are requesting

- increased access to Centrelink benefits
- free or subsidised medical and counselling services
- free legal aid
- assistance with the cost of education

Another highly rated concern among carers is the need for respite care, either through camps or activities (school-based or community groups). Carers note that they find it difficult to have time to themselves, or socialise with people their own age.

### Education

A number of carers have noted that they would like to see more assistance to improve the educational success of the children/young people in their care, and would appreciate better access to tutors or teachers' aides. Carers also note that they would like equal treatment in schools.

### Service providers

It is still a major concern for some families that they are not receiving necessary information from organisations such as DHS or Centrelink. Many respondents suggest they would like better communication with service providers. For example, better training for Centrelink staff to deal with the particular needs of kinship carers.

### Futures planning

Some carers who indicated that they have no pressing concerns noted that they are nevertheless concerned about the future care of