

National Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Family Support (NCFS) Caregiver Profile: A Closer Look at Grandparents Caring for Grandchildren



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Millions of Americans provide care to others each day, supporting aging parents, young and adult children and grandchildren, spouses and partners, siblings, and other friends and relatives. Each population can experience different burdens and benefits associated with caregiving, depending on their own unique circumstances and the needs of the care recipient. While much research has been done to try to enhance our understanding of the needs and experiences of caregivers, data collection processes are inconsistent across caregiver populations. In a series of policy briefs, including this one, the University of Pittsburgh National Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Family Support (NCFS) leverages large, national datasets to construct a detailed profile of different types of caregivers, highlighting both current knowledge and key gaps. The goal of these policy briefs is to provide a more granular understanding of the unique needs of caregiver sub-populations to inform program supports and future policy development. In this brief, we present data and profile grandparents as caregivers, and care recipients, and highlight the changing status and roles of this important cohort.

Executive Summary

Over the past decade, the demographics of grandparents in the United States have shifted significantly. The number of grandparents over age 60 are increasing as the U.S. population ages. While the overall number of grandparents living with grandchildren has remained steady over the past decade, the number of grandparents who are living with but not caring for their grandchildren has gone up sharply, which could indicate an increasing burden on sandwich generation caregivers, adults caring for an aging parent and minor child at the same time. The number of grandparent caregivers living with and providing primary care for their grandchildren has decreased; however, grandparents who are caring for their grandchildren with no parent present in the household have emerged as a particularly vulnerable group, with higher rates of disability, lower rates of employment and educational attainment, and a higher likelihood of living below the poverty line. Their status and well-being are often compounded by older age and longer duration in caregiving relationships. The data in this report on the challenges faced by this vulnerable group underscores the need to move forward with strategies to provide the employment, financial, and other key supports to grandparent and kin caregivers. Many of these strategies and potential solutions were articulated in the 2022 National Strategy to Support Family Caregivers from the Advisory Council to Support Grandparents Raising Grandchildren (SGRG) and the Recognize, Assist, Include, Support, and Engage (RAISE) Act Family Caregiving Advisory Council. A more fine-grained understanding of the role of grandparents in multigeneration households is essential to optimizing support strategies for grandparents living and caring for grandchildren.

Grandparents are an invaluable source of support for their children and grandchildren. They provide financial assistance, lodging, childcare, and help with errands, housework, and home repairs and many other tangible and intangible supports. Of the 70 million grandparents in the United States, about 6.5 million live with one or more of their grandchildren under the age 18. In Pennsylvania, 208,000 grandparents live with a grandchild. About one third of these grandparents have primary responsibility for the care of one or more grandchildren (see Table 1). Grandparents can also have primary responsibility for care either with a parent present (1.3 million in the United States; 43,000 in Pennsylvania) or with no parent present in the household (809,000 in the United States; 27,000 in Pennsylvania). Based on available data, a majority of grandparents living with a grandchild are female and married.

In contrast to existing reports on grandparents, we take a more finely-grained approach, comparing the cohort of grandparents raising grandchildren alone to grandparent caregivers living with a parent present, as well as grandparents who live with their grandchildren but are not primarily responsible for their grandchild's care. We address four major questions:

1. How has the demography of grandparent care changed over time?
2. Among grandparents who live with a grandchild, what differentiates grandparents who do from those who do not have primary responsibility for a grandchild?
3. What role does the absence or presence of a parent in the household play among grandparents responsible for a grandchild?
4. What is the disability status of grandparents caring for a grandchild?

We examine these questions using American Community Survey (ACS) data from 2009 to 2021. To explore possible local variations regarding these questions, we compare U.S. data with data from Pennsylvania. Key findings of this report are briefly summarized below.



Overall, the number of grandparents living with grandchildren has remained stable over the last 12 years, but there has been a significant shift in the distribution of grandparents living with and not responsible for care versus grandparents living with and responsible for care. In the United States, grandparents living with but not responsible for care have increased dramatically by 15% or 587,000. The number of grandparents with primary responsibility for care with a parent also present has decreased by 29% or 521,000, and by 11% or 106,000 for grandparents responsible for care with no parent present. A similar pattern of change was observed for Pennsylvania, although the increase in grandparents living with grandchildren with no care responsibilities was smaller at only 7%. A second feature of this demographic shift was the fact that across all three typologies, large declines occurred in the number of younger grandparents (age <60 years), while the number of grandparents aged 60 and older increased. The latter finding may in part be driven by declining teenage and young adult births, which would decrease the opportunity to become a grandparent at a young age, and the overall aging of the grandparent population.

Grandparents living with grandchildren who do not have primary responsibility for grandchild care are more likely to be foreign-born and older, but less likely to be married, below poverty level in income, and less likely to be employed when compared to grandparents who have primary responsibility for grandchild care. Levels of disability in this population are relatively high (27% in the United States and 33% in Pennsylvania), suggesting that grandparents without primary responsibility for care may be living in households with grandchildren in part to receive support from their children and other family members in the household. At the same time, they may be heavily involved in grandchild care even though they do not have primary responsibility for care.

Grandparents living with and responsible for grandchildren with no parent present are worse off on many indicators compared to those responsible for grandchildren with a parent present. At both the national level and in Pennsylvania, grandparent caregivers without a parent present were more likely to have a disability, more likely to live below the poverty line, less likely to be employed and had lower levels of educational attainment. Grandparent caregivers without a parent present are also older as a cohort, with a majority over age 60, and more likely to be in a longer-term caregiving relationship, with 88.4% at the national level and 86.9% in Pennsylvania reporting they had been responsible for their grandchild for a year or more.

In the United States, and Pennsylvania, approximately 25% of grandparents living with a grandchild have one or more disabilities. One might expect that grandparents responsible for their grandchildren without a parent present in the household might have lower disability rates since the demands for care are greater for this group. However, the data shows that this is not the case. Disability rates for grandparents with no parent present are higher when compared to grandparents responsible for care with a parent present. This population may have unique needs for support.

In 2022, the Advisory Council to Support Grandparents Raising Grandchildren (SGRG) and the Recognize, Assist, Include, Support, and Engage (RAISE) Act Family Caregiving Advisory Council jointly developed and released recommendations to support caregivers. The recommendations in the 2022 National Strategy to Support Family Caregivers from SGRG and RAISE touch a broad range of areas that impact grand families and kin families, including access to respite care; the availability of legal services to assist with custody issues; financial literacy and planning; enhancing workplace protections and flexibility for employed caregivers; improving the availability and competency of mental health supports for children in grand families as well as caregivers; and reducing the administrative and financial burden on grand families applying for public assistance programs. The SGRG Advisory Council report highlights the needs and challenges faced by grandparents or kin who are primarily

responsible for raising a child. The 2022 National Strategy recommendations are highly relevant to the needs of grandparents caring for grandchildren without a parent present, and the data in this report emphasize the need to move forward with strategies to provide employment, financial, and other key supports to grandparent and kin caregivers.

Increasing rates of older grandparents with disabilities living with adult children and grandchildren could point to potential growth among “sandwich generation” caregivers providing support to aging parents with long-term services and supports needs while also raising young children. Working-age adults within this cohort can be vulnerable to employment and financial instability as a result of dual caregiving responsibilities, highlighting the need for interventions designed to address needs across the lifespan, from child to elder care. Increasing cohabitation among grandparents, adult children, and grandchildren may also indicate economic strain related to housing or other hardships.

Additionally, the disability rates among grandparents residing with grandchildren emphasizes a need for further study of youth caregivers and the potential of mutually supportive relationships among caregivers and care recipients within these demographics. A grandparent receiving care from an adult child may also provide support to a grandchild, or a grandparent who struggles with ambulation may receive assistance from a youth caregiver residing in the household. These questions point to a need for more fine-grained data on the tasks performed by individuals in multigeneration households and the burdens and rewards of performing them. Further exploration could help to illuminate these relationships and better understand the needs of these populations.





Detailed Report

DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE

Table 1.

Grandparents living with grandchildren under 18 years of age by responsibility for grandchildren and with and without the presence of a parent in the household, United States and Pennsylvania, 2021

	UNITED STATES	PENNSYLVANIA
Total grandparents living with grandchildren	6,655,574	207,813
Grandparents living with but not responsible for grandchildren	4,571,669	138,055
Grandparents living with and responsible for grandchildren with parent present	1,275,402	42,516
Grandparents living with and responsible for grandchildren with no parent present	808,503	27,242

American Community Survey One-Year (2021) Estimates

CHANGE OVER TIME: 2009 TO 2021

- Overall, the number of grandparents living with grandchildren decreased slightly in both the United States and Pennsylvania between 2009 and 2021. This decline was due to large decreases in the number of grandparents responsible for grandchildren, both with and without a parent present in the household. The number of grandparents living with but not responsible for grandchildren increased in both the U.S. (14.7%) and Pennsylvania (6.6%).
- Age of grandparents is strongly associated with the rates of change among grandparents living with their grandchildren. There were large declines, ranging from 14% to 47%, among younger grandparents (ages 30-59), regardless of caregiving status between 2009 and 2021 (see Table 2).
- Similar patterns of change were observed among grandparents not responsible for care. However, the decline in the number of grandparents under 60 was smaller, and the increase in grandparents age 60 and over was greater when compared to grandparents responsible for grandchildren.
- The divergent patterns of change over time for younger and older grandparents are illustrated in Figure 1 for the United States and Pennsylvania. Regardless of whether or not a grandparent is responsible for care, or the presence or absence of a parent in the household, the number of younger grandparents is steadily declining, while the number of older grandparents living with grandchildren is increasing.

Table 2.

Change in number of grandparents living with grandchildren by responsibility for care, presence of parent, and age, 2009 to 2021

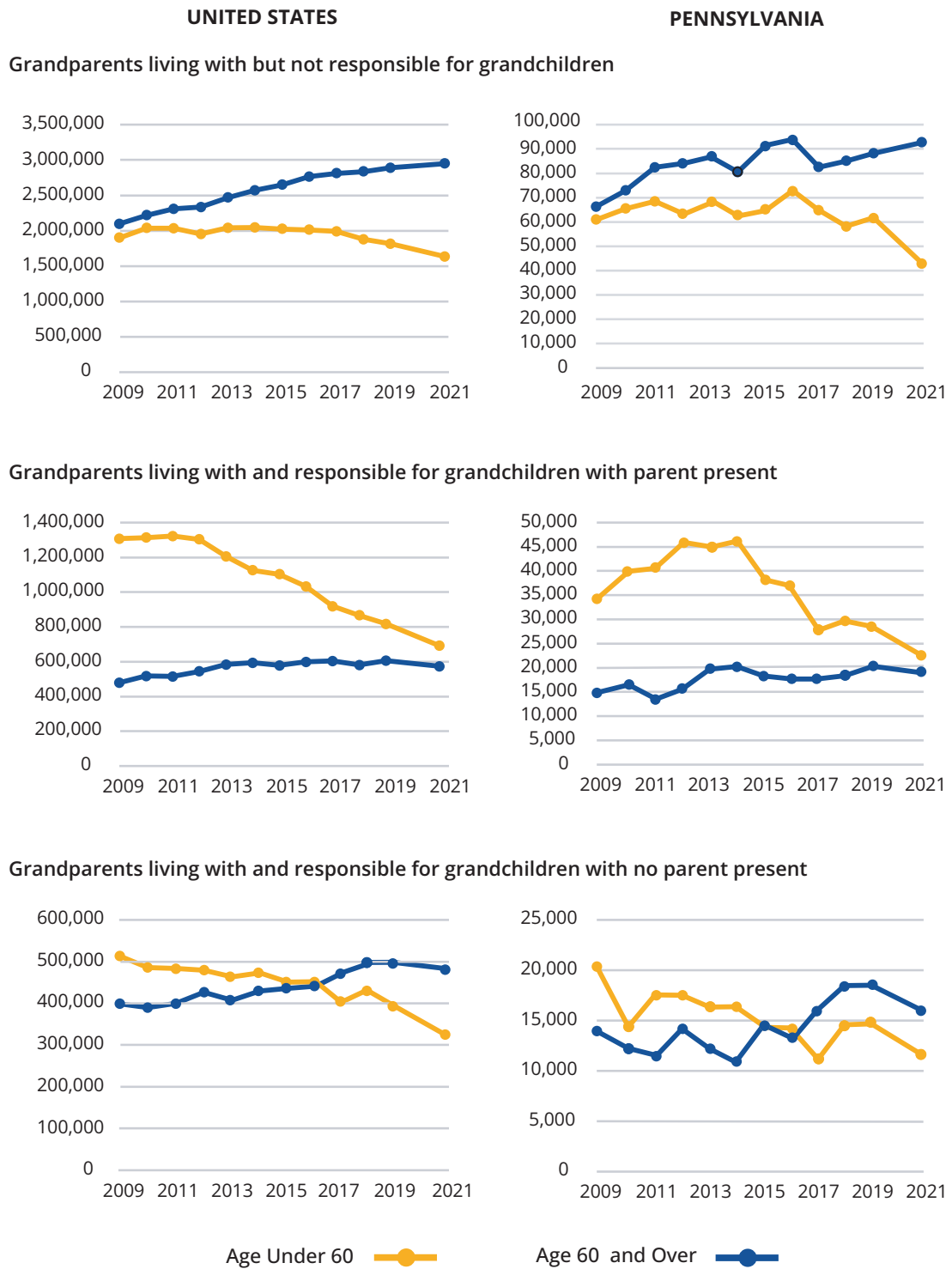
UNITED STATES

	2009	2021	Change	
Total grandparents living with grandchildren	6,696,060	6,656,039	-40,021	-0.6%
Not responsible for grandchildren	3,996,692	4,583,397	586,705	14.7%
Ages 30-59	1,899,673	1,635,337	-264,336	-13.9%
Age 60 and over	2,097,019	2,948,060	851,041	40.6%
Responsible for grandchildren with parent present	1,786,911	1,265,998	-520,913	-29.2%
Ages 30-59	1,307,814	692,291	-615,523	-47.1%
Age 60 and over	479,097	573,707	94,610	19.7%
Responsible for grandchildren with no parent present	912,457	806,644	-105,813	-11.6%
Ages 30-59	513,416	325,427	-187,989	-36.6%
Age 60 and over	399,041	481,217	82,176	20.6%

PENNSYLVANIA

	2009	2021	Change	
Total grandparents living with grandchildren	210,623	204,969	-5,654	-2.7%
Not responsible for grandchildren	127,224	135,572	8,348	6.6%
Ages 30-59	60,958	42,793	-18,165	-29.8%
Age 60 and over	66,266	92,779	26,513	40.0%
Responsible for grandchildren with parent present	49,076	41,782	-7,294	-14.9%
Ages 30-59	34,240	22,556	-11,684	-34.1%
Age 60 and over	14,836	19,226	4,390	29.6%
Responsible for grandchildren with no parent present	34,323	27,615	-6,708	-19.5%
Ages 30-59	20,364	11,634	-8,730	-42.9%
Age 60 and over	13,959	15,981	2,022	14.5%

Figure 1.
Grandparents living with grandchildren by age, responsibility, and presence of parent, 2009-2021



Note: The American Community Survey did not distribute estimates for 2020.

COMPARING GRANDPARENTS LIVING WITH AND RESPONSIBLE FOR CARE VERSUS GRANDPARENTS LIVING WITH AND NOT RESPONSIBLE FOR CARE, WITH AND WITHOUT THE PRESENCE OF A PARENT IN THE HOUSEHOLD (2021).

- In both the United States and Pennsylvania, grandparents living with grandchildren are primarily female and married (see Table 3). How do grandparents with and without responsibility for grandchildren compare? In both the U.S. and Pennsylvania, grandparents who live with but are not responsible for the care of grandchildren compared to those who are responsible for care are less likely to be black, below the poverty level, and employed, and more likely to be Asian, and foreign-born.
- In the United States, what differentiates grandparents responsible for care depending on the presence or absence of a parent? Compared to grandparents caring for a grandchild with a parent present, grandparents with no parent present have a higher proportion of whites and fewer individuals of other race/ethnicities or foreign-born grandparents, are less likely to be employed and more likely to be below the poverty level, and are age 60 or over.
- Differences between grandparents responsible for care with and without the presence of a parent were similar for Pennsylvania. In addition, grandparents in Pennsylvania responsible for care with no parent present were less likely to be Asian and were more likely to have cared for a grandchild for a year or longer when compared to grandparents with a parent present.



Table 3.
Demographics of grandparents living with grandchildren, United States and Pennsylvania, 2021

	Grandparents living with grandchildren and		
	Not responsible for grandchildren	Responsible for grandchildren with parent present	Responsible for grandchildren with no parent present
UNITED STATES			
White-alone	44.5%	47.7%	63.3%
Black-alone	14.2%	18.9%	19.3%
Asian-alone	11.5%	5.7%	1.1%
All other (includes multi-race)	29.8%	27.7%	16.4%
Male	37.1%	36.3%	37.0%
Female	62.9%	63.7%	63.0%
Married (including separated and spouse absent)	56.7%	62.3%	65.0%
Foreign-born	38.3%	25.6%	8.0%
Below the poverty level	10.2%	15.7%	23.4%
Employed	39.5%	53.8%	45.8%
Responsible for grandchildren for a year or longer		82.4%	88.4%
With any disability	27.0%	24.1%	27.8%
Age 60 or over	64.3%	45.3%	59.7%
Bachelor's degree or higher	16.6%	15.0%	14.0%
Population estimate	4,571,669	1,275,402	808,503
PENNSYLVANIA			
White-alone	61.5%	59.0%	71.1%
Black-alone	12.6%	15.2%	21.0%
Asian-alone	11.8%	7.7%	0.1%
All other (includes multi-race)	14.1%	18.0%	7.9%
Male	36.4%	36.9%	36.4%
Female	63.6%	63.1%	63.6%
Married (including separated and spouse absent)	55.6%	58.3%	65.8%
Foreign-born	22.3%	13.6%	3.8%
Below the poverty level	11.7%	14.1%	28.7%
Employed	35.2%	52.8%	45.6%
Responsible for grandchildren for a year or longer		77.5%	86.9%
With any disability	32.9%	22.9%	27.4%
Age 60 or over	68.4%	46.0%	57.9%
Bachelor's degree or higher	14.9%	17.6%	13.1%
Population estimate	138,055	42,516	27,242

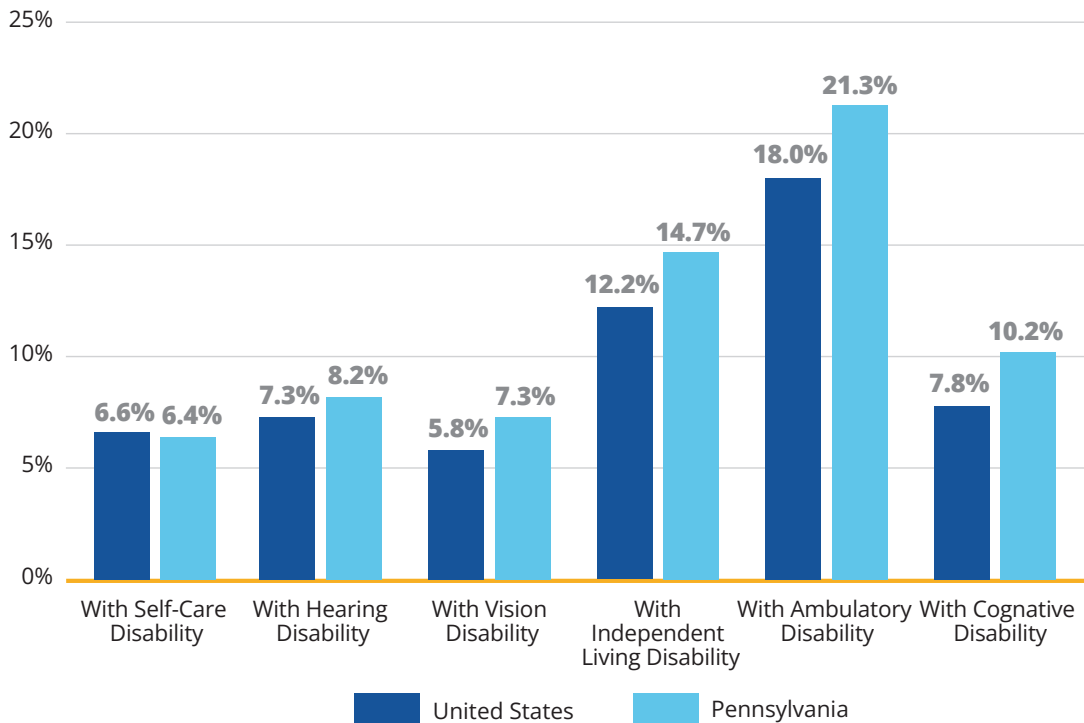
Compiled from American Community Survey One-Year (2021) Estimates and ACS Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS)

GRANDPARENTS AND DISABILITY

- In the United States and Pennsylvania, disability rates are higher among grandparents living with but not responsible for care when compared to grandparents responsible for care. These rates are comparable to United States population rates for those age 65 and over.
- Disability rates for self-care, hearing, vision, independent living, ambulatory, and cognitive disability range from 2.7% to 21.3%, with the highest rates reported for ambulatory disability and the lowest rates for disability with self-care. Disability rates for the United States and Pennsylvania are very similar (see Figures 2-4).
- Disability rates for grandparents with no parent present are slightly higher when compared to grandparents with a parent present.

Figure 2.

Disability rates among grandparents living with but not responsible for grandchildren under age 18 – United States and Pennsylvania, 2021



Compiled from American Community Survey One-Year (2021) Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS) Data

Figure 3. Disability rates among grandparents living with and responsible for grandchildren under age 18, with a parent present in the household – United States and Pennsylvania, 2021

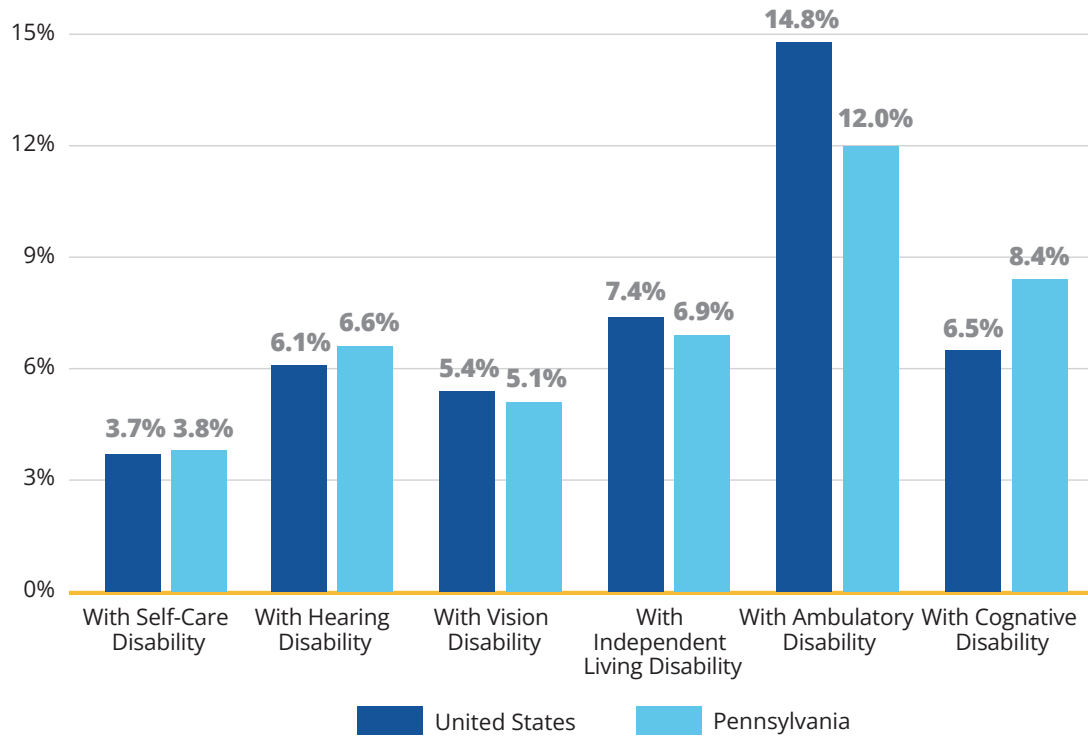
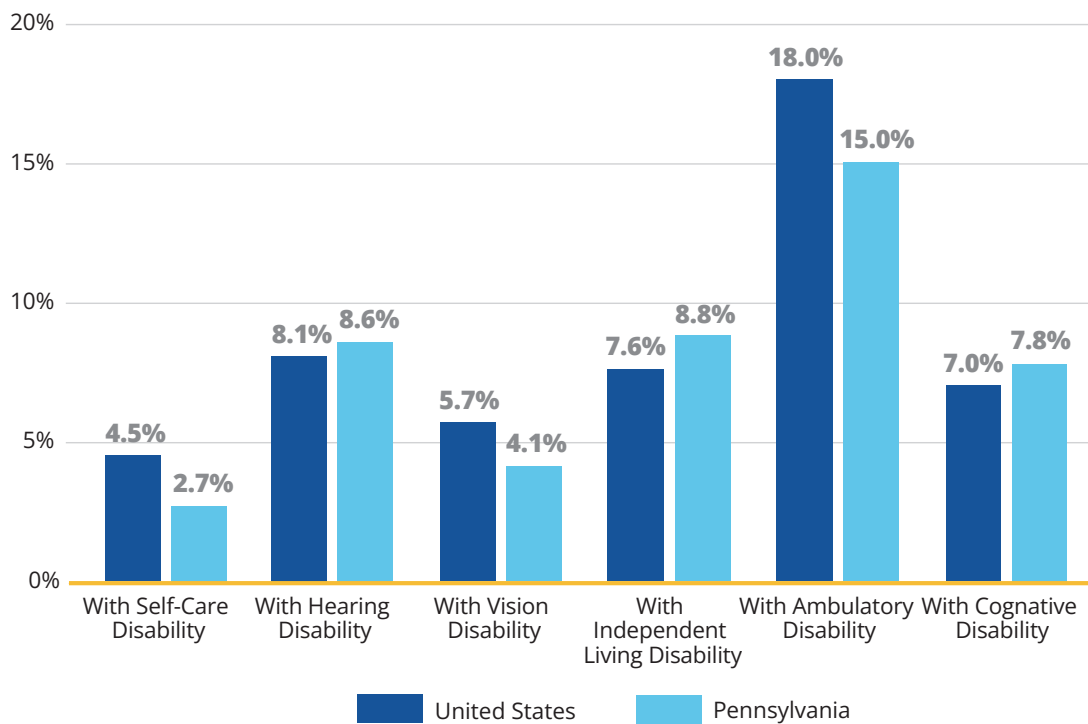


Figure 4. Disability rates among grandparents living with and responsible for grandchildren under age 18, with no parent present in the household – United States and Pennsylvania, 2021



GRANDPARENT DISABILITY AND CHANGE OVER TIME

- Tables 4 and 5 show that overall, the number of grandparents living with grandchildren changes little in either the United States or Pennsylvania, regardless of disability status.
- Among grandparents with disability, changes over time vary by age and responsibility level for care. In the United States, grandparents age 60 and older with disability and living with a grandchild increased by 24 % while grandparents with disability and with primary responsibility for care increased by 2.6 %. In Pennsylvania these shifts are even more dramatic with increases in the number of grandparents living with a grandchild and large decreases in number of grandparents responsible for care.
- In both the United States and Pennsylvania, the number of grandparents responsible for care with no parent present show large declines among younger grandparents, regardless of disability status, and increases among older grandparents without disability in the United States (32%) and Pennsylvania (30%). Among grandparents responsible for care with no parent present and with disability there is a 1% increase in the United States and a 13 % decrease in Pennsylvania.



Table 4.
Change in grandparents living with grandchildren by disability, responsibility for care, parent present, and age – United States, 2009-2021

	2009	2012	Change	
Without disability				
Total living with grandchildren	4,889,970	4,891,148	1,178	0.0%
Ages 30-59	3,003,386	2,170,674	-832,712	-27.7%
Age 60 and over	1,886,584	2,720,474	833,890	44.2%
Living with but not responsible for grandchildren	2,864,850	3,347,757	482,907	16.9%
Ages 30-59	1,548,376	1,366,088	-182,288	-11.8%
Age 60 and over	1,316,474	1,981,669	665,195	50.5%
Living with and responsible for grandchildren with parent present	1,381,310	960,752	-420,558	-30.4%
Ages 30-59	1,066,110	557,127	-508,983	-47.7%
Age 60 and over	315,200	403,625	88,425	28.1%
Living with and responsible for grandchildren with no parent present	643,810	582,639	-61,171	-9.5%
Ages 30-59	388,900	247,459	-141,441	-36.4%
Age 60 and over	254,910	335,180	80,270	31.5%
With disability				
Total living with grandchildren	1,806,090	1,764,891	-41,199	-2.3%
Ages 30-59	717,517	482,381	-235,136	-32.8%
Age 60 and over	1,088,573	1,282,510	193,937	17.8%
Living with but not responsible for grandchildren	1,131,842	1,235,640	103,798	9.2%
Ages 30-59	351,297	269,249	-82,048	-23.4%
Age 60 and over	780,545	966,391	185,846	23.8%
Living with and responsible for grandchildren with parent present	405,601	305,246	-100,355	-24.7%
Ages 30-59	241,704	135,164	-106,540	-44.1%
Age 60 and over	163,897	170,082	6,185	3.8%
Living with and responsible for grandchildren with no parent present	268,647	224,005	-44,642	-16.6%
Ages 30-59	124,516	77,968	-46,548	-37.4%
Age 60 and over	144,131	146,037	1,906	1.3%

Table 5.

Change in grandparents living with grandchildren by disability, responsibility for care, parent present, and age. Pennsylvania 2009-2021

	2009	2012	Change	
Without disability				
Total living with grandchildren	150,943	143,246	-7,697	-5.1%
Ages 30-59	93,083	59,773	-33,310	-35.8%
Age 60 and over	57,860	83,473	25,613	44.3%
Living with but not responsible for grandchildren	89,917	90,976	1,059	1.2%
Ages 30-59	50,046	32,980	-17,066	-34.1%
Age 60 and over	39,871	57,996	18,125	45.5%
Living with and responsible for grandchildren with parent present	36,245	32,212	-4,033	-11.1%
Ages 30-59	27,172	18,350	-8,822	-32.5%
Age 60 and over	9,073	13,862	4,789	52.8%
Living with and responsible for grandchildren with no parent present	24,781	20,058	-4,723	-19.1%
Ages 30-59	15,865	8,443	-7,422	-46.8%
Age 60 and over	8,916	11,615	2,699	30.3%
With disability				
Total living with grandchildren	59,680	61,723	2,043	3.4%
Ages 30-59	22,479	17,210	-5,269	-23.4%
Age 60 and over	37,201	44,513	7,312	19.7%
Living with but not responsible for grandchildren	37,307	44,596	7,289	19.5%
Ages 30-59	10,912	9,813	-1,099	-10.1%
Age 60 and over	26,395	34,783	8,388	31.8%
Living with and responsible for grandchildren with parent present	12,831	9,570	-3,261	-25.4%
Ages 30-59	7,068	4,206	-2,862	-40.5%
Age 60 and over	5,763	5,364	-399	-6.9%
Living with and responsible for grandchildren with no parent present	9,542	7,557	-1,985	-20.8%
Ages 30-59	4,499	3,191	-1,308	-29.1%
Age 60 and over	5,043	4,366	-677	-13.4%



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