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## Kinship International Network

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# How the Opioid Crisis Is Changing the American Family — with Grandparents Raising Grandchildren

MORE THAN 258,000 CHILDREN ARE IN TODAY'S FOSTER CARE SYSTEM DUE TO ALCOHOL OR DRUG USE BY PARENTS AND OF THOSE, 1 IN 3 CHILDREN ARE LIVING WITH RELATIVES, OFTEN GRANDPARENTS

Originally published in *People*, by Alexandra Rockey Fleming, 30 Jan 2019

**O**n average, 130 Americans die every day from an opioid overdose. Beth and Don Murray are another kind of casualty of the epidemic: Family members who are stepping up to raise the children—their grandchildren—left behind because their parents are in active addiction, in treatment, incarcerated, or deceased. More than 258,000 children are in today's foster care system due to alcohol or drug use by parents and of those, one in three children are living with relatives, often grandparents.

The Murrays didn't expect to be raising a new batch of children — four boys and two girls — in their 50s, when retirement should be a glimmer on the horizon. But once drugs ambushed their family, taking it easy no longer would be in the forecast for this Ohio couple.

Their two adult daughters, whom Beth says used to be good mothers who took care of their children, 'lost their motherly instinct' to opiates and now, Beth says, 'I can't with a clear conscience let the kids go back. And every night when they're all in bed I think, 'I made it through another day.'



Don and Beth Murray – Courtesy Murray Family

*"Their two adult daughters, whom Beth says used to be good mothers who took care of their children, "lost their motherly instinct" to opiates and now, Beth says, "I can't with a clear conscience let the kids go back."*

Grandparents offer the children of addicts a far better shot at a good future than non-relative foster parents, says Donna Butts, executive director of Generations United, a Washington, DC-based family advocacy group. 'Grandparents provide this protective web of love and roots and hope,' she says.

But for many, taking on a whole new lifetime of responsibility— for children who often have the physical and mental wounds of exposure to drugs and alcohol— can be overwhelming.



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People spoke to six families around the country who have stepped up to safeguard their grandchildren. Here are some of their stories.

Pamela and Stan Wentzel's grandson Jackson, five, was born with neonatal abstinence syndrome, a group of problems that occur in a newborn who was exposed to addictive drugs in utero. 'Cognitively, he's amazing, but he's very oppositional and often in a heightened hyper state,' says Pamela, 60, of Madison Heights, Michigan, whom Jackson calls 'Mom.' 'Stan and I both get drained. We don't know what causes it or how to shut it down.'

Stephen and Jacqueline Elm, 76 and 59, are raising three grandkids as their



*Pamela and Stanley Wentzel with grandson Jackson*

*When Felicia Crenshaw's daughter, Taylor, died from a fentanyl overdose in 2016, the Richmond, Virginia, mother of two instantly found herself raising Taylor's toddler, Madison. Even in her bereavement, Felicia, 53, says, 'My focus is on Madison and on healing.'*

daughter navigates recovery from opioid addiction. Two of the children bear the effects of NAS and, says Jacqueline, who lives in Kalispell, Montana, 'it hasn't been easy for us as a family.' Nor has the fact that grandfamilies often don't receive the same economic support as foster parents. 'Steve and I have invested everything we have in these children,' she says.

Cathy and Gary Overfield of Puyallup, Washington, took legal custody of grandson Dominic in 2012. His mother, Amy, succumbed several years later to an opioid overdose; his father also is deceased. 'My daughter went from nothing to a full-blown heroin addiction almost overnight,' says Cathy, 63. 'He had a healthy, loving mom until then. Now, we have to be the parents, and we weren't planning on this in our 60s.'

When Felicia Crenshaw's daughter, Taylor, died from a fentanyl overdose in 2016, the Richmond, Virginia, mother of two instantly found herself raising Taylor's toddler, Madison. Even in her bereavement, Felicia, 53, says, 'My focus is on Madison and on healing. When I look at her I see a vibrant child, the spitting image of my daughter, so free and full of life. I see so much hope.'



*Felicia Crenshaw and granddaughter Madison  
- Courtesy Crenshaw Family*

