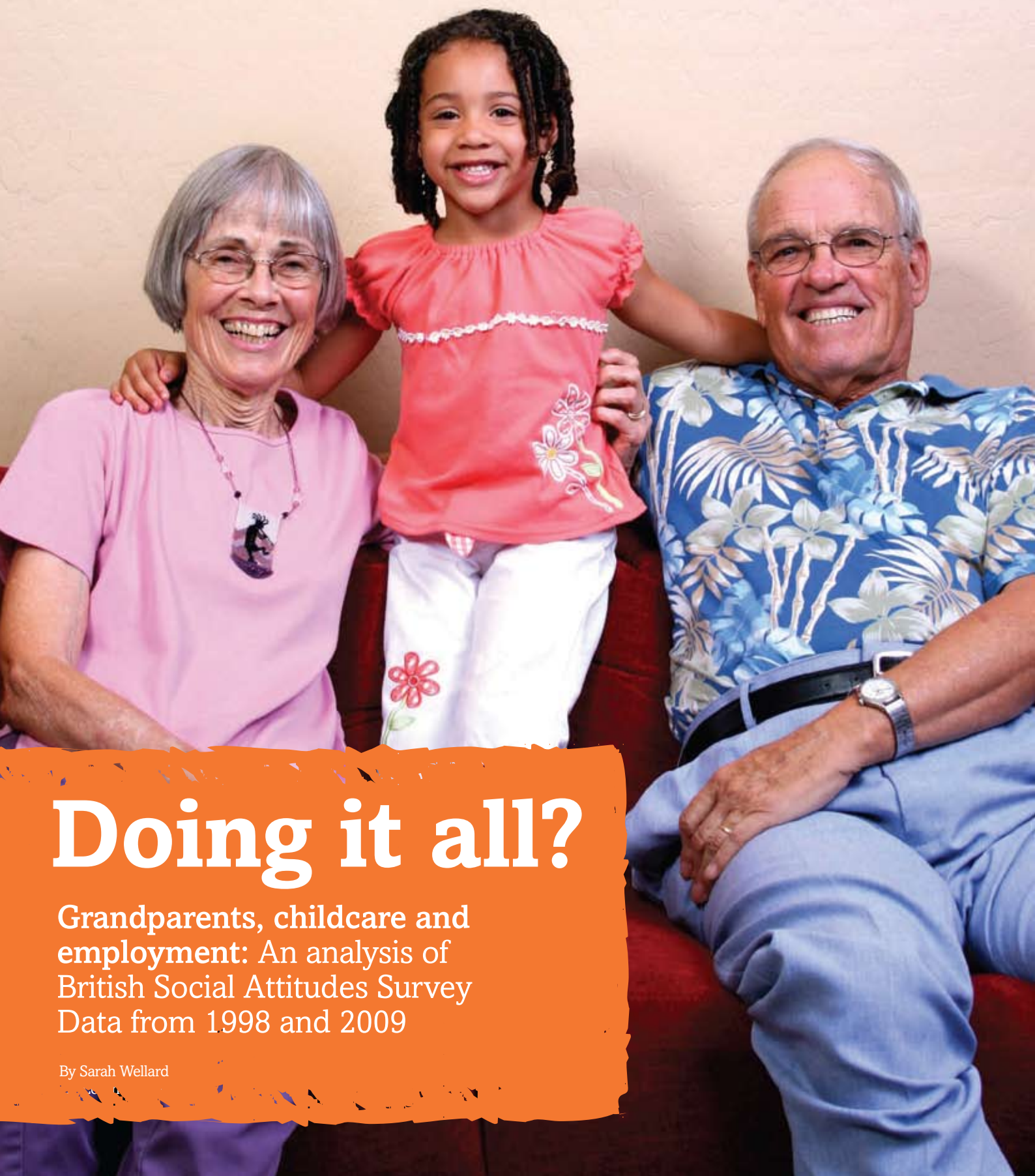


December 2011

Grandparents  
plus

We champion the wider  
family who care for children



# Doing it all?

Grandparents, childcare and  
employment: An analysis of  
British Social Attitudes Survey  
Data from 1998 and 2009

By Sarah Wellard

## **Acknowledgements**

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# Contents

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1. Executive summary	2
2. Introduction	4
About the British Social Attitudes Survey (BSA)	4
Context: Grandparents providing childcare	4
3. The demography of grandparenting in Great Britain: 1998 and 2009	6
Proportion of adults in the UK who are grandparents	6
Age of grandparents	6
Marital status of grandparents	8
Economic status of grandparents	8
Main sources of household income	9
Position of grandparents in the income distribution	10
Grandparents in the “sandwich generation”	11
4. Grandparents who look after their grandchildren	12
Ages of grandparents providing childcare	13
Marital status of grandparents who provide childcare	14
Economic status of grandparents providing childcare	15
Grandparents in the “sandwich generation”	16
5. Conclusions	17
6. Policy recommendations	19

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Graphs

1: Proportion of adults with a grandchild under 16 by age and gender, 2009	6
2: Age profile of grandparents, 2009	7
3: Proportion of people in different age groups who are grandparents, 1998 and 2009	7
4: Marital status of grandparents, 1998 and 2009	8
5: Economic status of grandparents, 1998 and 2009	9
6: Main source of household income, 1998 and 2009	9
7: Grandparents by income quartile, 1998 and 2009	10
8: Grandparents with a parent still alive by employment status, 2009	11
9: Proportions of grandparents who provide childcare by time spent and gender, 2009	12
10: Hours of childcare provide by grandmothers and by grandfathers, 2009	13
11: Proportion of grandparents who look after their grandchildren by age, 2009	13
12: Age distribution of grandparents who look after their grandchildren, 2009	14
13: Marital status of grandparents who look after their grandchildren, 2009	15
14: Proportion of grandparents who look after their grandchildren by economic status, 2009	15
15: Employment status of grandparents who look after their grandchildren, 2009	16

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# 1. Executive summary

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**30% of all adult women are grandmothers, and 25% of men are grandfathers**

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This report presents new data from the British Social Attitudes Survey (BSA) from 1998 and 2009 conducted by NatCen to analyse grandparenting in Britain today, and draw comparisons with grandparenting a decade ago.

## **Who are grandparents today?**

There are an estimated 13.6 million grandparents in Britain today, 7.6 million grandmothers and 6 million grandfathers.

Three in ten (30%) of all adult women in Britain are grandmothers, and 25% of men. By the age of 65, the majority of adults are grandparents.

44% of grandparents (including those with adult grandchildren) are aged under 65, and 50% of those with grandchildren under the age of 16.

More than a third (34%) of all grandparents are living without a partner (widowed, divorced or separated), but grandmothers are much more likely to be living without a partner (45%) than grandfathers (19%). 16% of grandmothers are divorced or separated, and 9% of grandfathers. 28% of grandmothers are widowed, and 9% of grandfathers.

29% of all grandparents are working, but just 22% of grandmothers compared with 37% of grandfathers. 55% of all grandparents are retired, but more grandmothers (59%) than grandfathers (51%).

39% of grandmothers and 25% of grandfathers are dependent on the state pension for their main source of income. 28% of grandmothers and 35% of grandfathers have income from employment as their main source of income.

Evidence from the Department of Work and Pension's Household's Below Average Income (HBAI) series support the BSA finding that retired grandmothers are more likely than grandfathers to be living in poverty.

28% of grandparents with grandchildren under 16 are in the "sandwich generation" with their own parents still alive.

## **How have grandparents changed over the past decade?**

Grandparents are getting older. There are now more grandparents aged over 75 and fewer aged under 65 than in 1998. 34% of women aged 50 to 54 are grandmothers in 2009, compared with 41% in 1998. 47% of men aged 55 to 64 are grandfathers in 2009, compared with 56% in 1998.

The proportion of grandparents who are divorced or separated has increased since 1998. In 2009 just 55% of grandmothers were living with a partner, compared with 62% in 1998. For grandfathers, the proportion living with a partner is now 81%, compared with 85% in 1998. Rates of widowhood remain unchanged.

Grandmothers are more likely to be retired than in 1998 and grandfathers are more likely to still be working.

The proportion of grandmothers living in households where the main source of income is from employment has fallen from 33% to 27% since 1998, while more grandfathers (37%) are now receiving income from work, compared with 31% in 1998.

Evidence from the Households Below Average Income series indicates that older pensioners are less likely to be living in poverty than in 1998, however BSA data suggests that overall grandmothers have tended to become poorer relative both to population averages and when compared with grandfathers.

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**63% of grandparents with grandchildren under 16 provide childcare**

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### **What role do grandparents play in providing childcare?**

Grandparents have always played an important role in looking after their grandchildren, and despite the big increase in formal childcare provision over the past decade, they continue to play a vital role in providing informal care. This may be in addition to formal care, help after school or during school holidays, and grandparent childcare is often instead of formal care for babies and very young children. Research from the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing (ELSA) finds that looking after grandchildren tends to enhance grandparents' quality of life, while looking after a partner is associated with a poorer quality of life.

Nearly two thirds (63%) of grandparents (with grandchildren under 16), around 7 million in total, look after their grandchildren, with little difference in proportions between grandmothers and grandfathers. But grandmothers are more likely than grandfathers to provide higher levels of care of at least 10 hours a week – 19% of grandmothers compared with 14% of grandfathers.

Because there are more grandmothers than grandfathers in the population, overall nearly twice as many grandmothers as grandfathers are providing at least 10 hours a week of childcare.

Young grandmothers aged under 50 are more likely than older grandmothers to provide childcare, but overall most childcare is provided by grandmothers and grandfathers aged 55 to 64, followed by grandparents aged 65 to 74, because there are many more grandparents in the population in these age groups.

Most grandparents providing childcare are married or living as married, but more than one in five (21%) are grandmothers who are widowed, separated or divorced. Most grandparents who provide childcare are retired or not working, but a higher proportion of working than working grandparents say they provide care, again reflecting the fact that there are many more grandparents who are retired or not working than those who are still working.

Over seven in ten (72%) of grandparents in the sandwich generation with grandchildren under 16 and a parent still alive are providing childcare for their grandchildren. This group are under particular pressure to combine work and care.

### **Conclusions**

At the moment much of the informal childcare on which families and our economy depend is provided by grandmothers aged between 55 and 65 who are not working. As older people are expected to remain longer in the workplace before they can receive state or occupational pensions, grandmothers in particular will be put under pressure to combine work with childcare.

Population ageing means that grandparents are increasingly likely to be in the sandwich generation under pressure to combine work with childcare and possibly also care for elderly relatives. Grandparents are also likely to be older, and may themselves be in poorer health or have a partner who needs care, potentially reducing their capacity to look after their grandchildren.

Without adequate state support for both formal childcare and eldercare, there is a risk of a serious care gap emerging, with more mothers leaving the workplace because of a lack of childcare, or older women leaving to provide care for grandchildren, elderly relatives or partners.

There is also a risk of grandmothers becoming increasingly vulnerable to poverty if they leave work early to provide care.



## 2. Introduction

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**There are nearly four million grandparent carers in the UK**

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This report uses data from the 1998 and 2009 1998 British Social Attitudes Survey to address the following questions:

1. Who are grandparents today and how is the picture of grandparenting in Great Britain changing over time?
2. What is the role of grandparents in providing informal childcare? How much childcare do they provide and which groups of grandparents are providing the most, in terms of gender, age, occupation and income group?

### **About the British Social Attitudes Survey (BSA)**

The British Social Attitudes Survey (BSA) is conducted annually by NatCen, a leading independent social research institute, and in 2009 was based on face to face interviews with 3423 adults. BSA includes questions relating to demography and social attitudes. In 1998 and 2009 specific questions were asked about grandparenting. However, because the questions asked about childcare in 1998 and 2009 were very different, it is not possible to compare responses between these years on grandparents providing childcare, although we can make comparisons about the demography of grandparents. In 2009 806 of those interviewed were adults with at least one grandchild under the age of 16 and 946 had at least one grandchild of any age. In 1998 870 of the 3146 adults interviewed were grandparents with a grandchild of any age.

### **Context: Grandparents providing childcare**

Studies by social historians show that at least since the industrial revolution, grandparents have always looked after their grandchildren. Michael Anderson's study of families in nineteenth century Lancashire describes how most working mothers had a co-resident grandmother who looked after the children in return for her own keep<sup>1</sup>. Young and Wilmott's study of working class families in East London<sup>2</sup> in the 1950s describes the reciprocal relationships between mothers and grandmothers, and Townsend's *Family Life of Old People*<sup>3</sup> documents the role of grandmothers in providing childcare and other services. Despite official invisibility of grandparents during the seventies, eighties and nineties, research by Geoff Dench shows that the needs of children and grandchildren continued to be of great significance to older people, and grandmothers in particular saw themselves as actively involved in reciprocal family networks. Dench and Ogg's study based on a special grandparenting module in the 1998 British Social Attitudes Survey provides a detailed picture of grandparents' role in providing childcare and other support to families.

Since the introduction of the National Childcare Strategy in 1998 there has been a major policy shift in the UK towards much greater provision of formal childcare, and a continued lack of policy focus on informal childcare. Despite this, recent research highlights the important role which grandparents continue to play in providing informal childcare both to complement and as a substitute for formal childcare.

A recent study by the Daycare Trust<sup>4</sup> suggests that there are nearly four million grandparent carers in the UK, typically providing around 10 hours of childcare a week. The researchers found that most parents who use grandparent childcare do so to enable them to work, often as wrap-around care after school and during holidays, in combination with formal child care such as the 15 hours free early years education, and/or as a back up when children are ill or other childcare arrangements breakdown. Many parents with babies and young children use grandparents as their main form of childcare. They also found that parents generally choose grandparents when formal care is unaffordable and that low income households and lone parents rely on grandparent childcare much more than higher income households. Parents also choose grandparents because they want their child looked after by a trusted relative in a home setting. The researchers found marked regional and ethnic

differences in the use of grandparent childcare, with much lower rates in London and within ethnic minority communities, which they concluded was due to high rates of internal and international migration which have reduced the proximity of grandparents.

The Daycare Trust study found that while the grandparents they interviewed did not generally wish for a formal payment system some wanted other support such as flexible working and access to grandparent toddler groups. Some felt uncomfortable at Sure Start children's centres.

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**50% of mothers rely on grandparents to look after their babies when they return to work**

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The Department for Education's Annual Childcare and Early Years Survey of Parents found that in 2008 one in three working mothers, and one in four of all working parents, rely on grandparents for childcare<sup>5</sup>. 43% of children aged under five whose mother is working are looked after by grandparents, 42% of children aged between five and ten, and 18% of 11 to 16 year olds. Another recent study underlines the importance of grandparent providing childcare for very young children. The Department of Work and Pension's Maternity and Paternity Rights and Women Returners Survey 2009/10<sup>6</sup> found that half (50%) of mothers returning to work after maternity leave rely on grandparents to look after their babies.

Analysis of data on caring from the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing (ELSA)<sup>7</sup> found that caring for grandchildren was associated with a higher quality of life. The relationship between quality of life and caring depended on who they were caring for and the burden of care (indicated by hours spent caring and the carer's sense of obligation), with care for partners being associated with a lower quality of life. The ELSA analysis also found that women were looking after their grandchildren more frequently than men.

# 3. The demography of grandparenting in Great Britain: 1998 and 2009

## Proportion of adults in the UK who are grandparents

30% of all women aged 18 and over are grandmothers (including those with grown up grandchildren) and 25% of all men are grandfathers, very similar to in 1998, when the proportions of grandmothers and grandfathers in the population were 29% and 26% respectively. 24% of women in the UK are grandmothers with grandchildren under 16, and 22% of men are grandfathers with grandchildren under 16. As the population ages, with people living longer, a higher proportion of the population are likely to be grandparents.

It is estimated that there are a total of 13.6 million grandparents in Britain today, 7.5 million grandmothers and 6 million grandfathers<sup>9</sup>.

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50% of women aged 55 to 59 are grandmothers

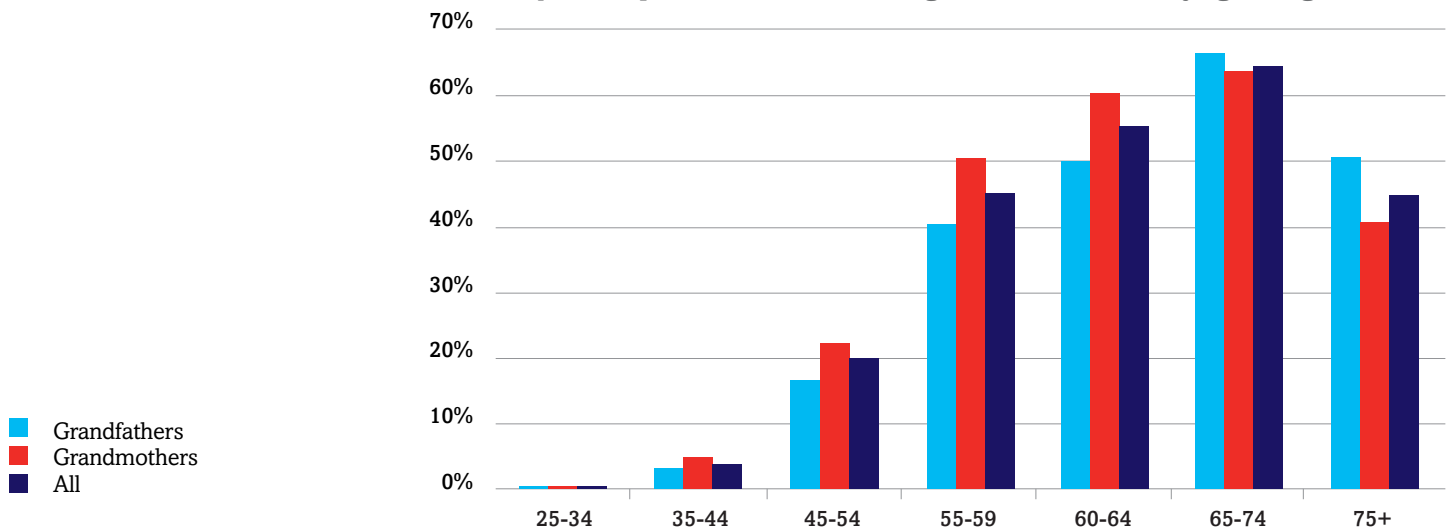
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## Age of grandparents

Grandparents are getting older.

By the age of 65, the majority of adults in the population are grandparents (with grandchildren under the age of 16). Women on average become grandparents at a younger age than men. Half (50%) of women in the population aged 55 to 59 are grandmothers, compared to 41% of men. One in five of adults aged 45 to 54 are grandparents, with a higher proportion of grandmothers (23% of women) than grandfathers (17% of men). The proportion of adults who are grandparents of grandchildren under 16 declines beyond the age of 75, because their grandchildren are likely to be reaching their late teens or adulthood (see graph 1).

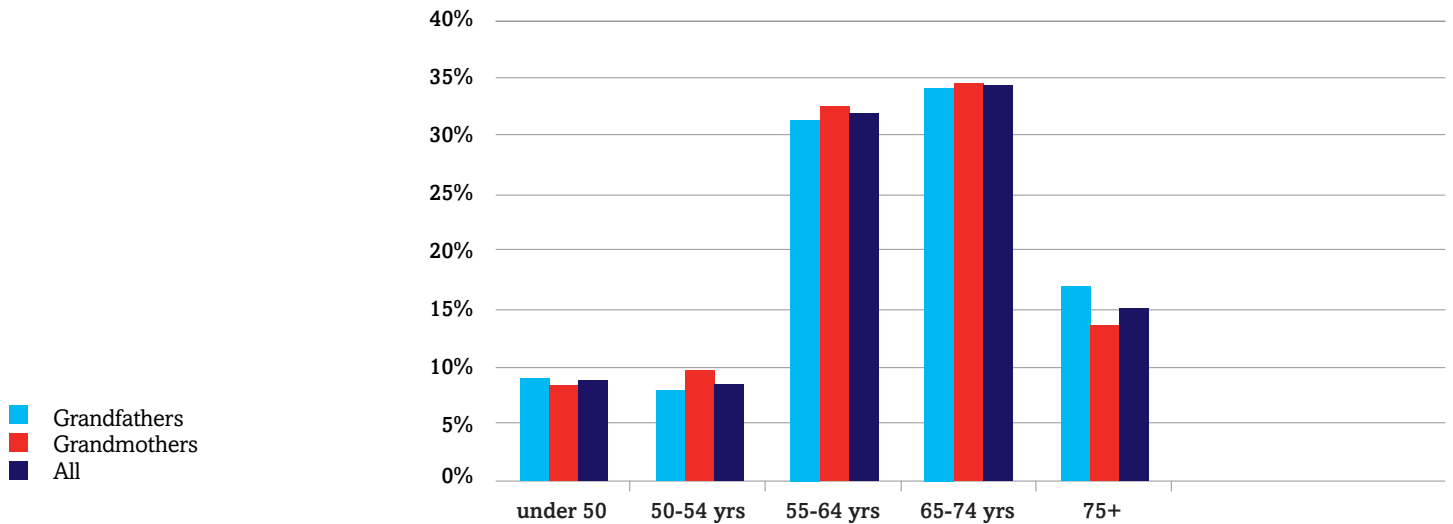
Graph 1: Proportion of adults with a grandchild under 16 by age and gender, 2009



The majority of grandparents (including those with adult grandchildren) are aged between 55 and 74, with little difference between grandmothers and grandfathers. 44% of grandparents are under the age of 65. 16% are under the age of 55. (50% of grandparents with grandchildren under 16 are under 65, and 18% under 55, see graph 2.)



Graph 2: Age profile of grandparents, 2009  
(base: grandparents with grandchildren aged under 16)



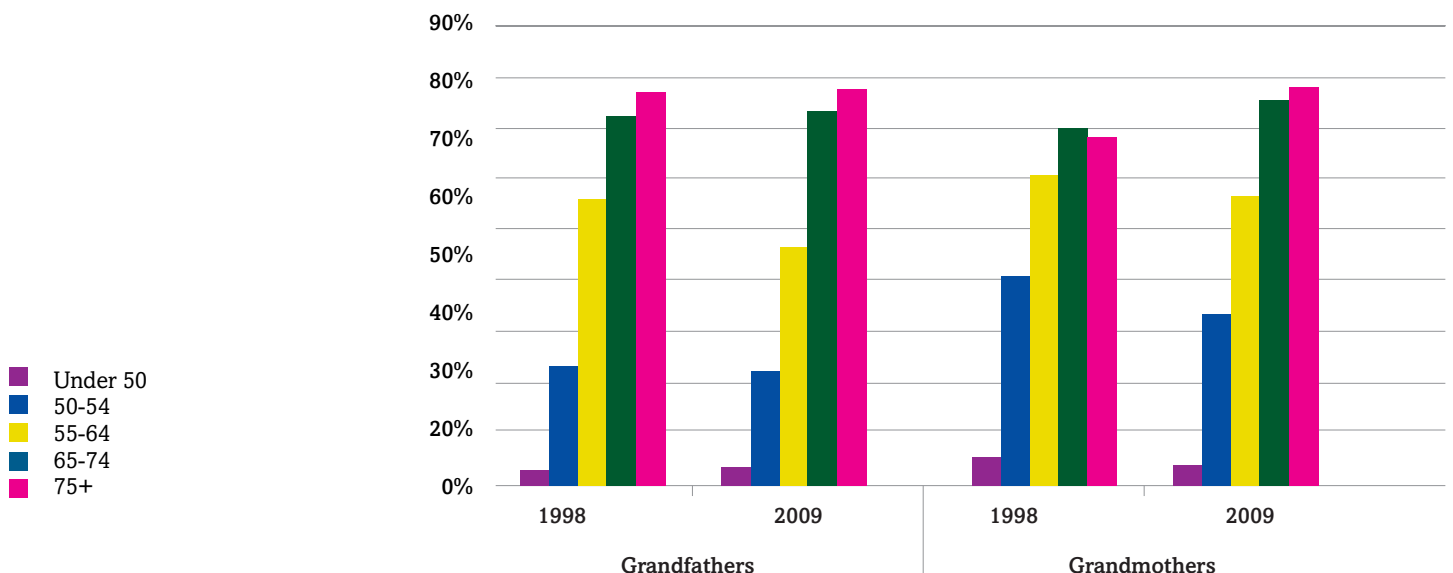
The proportion of younger men (under the age of 55) who are grandfathers (including those with grown up grandchildren) has remained almost unchanged since 1998 (22% of 50 to 54 year olds in 2009, compared to 24% in 1998, see graph 3). In contrast there is a declining proportion of grandfathers in the 55 to 64 age group, with 47% of 55 to 64 year olds being grandfathers in 2009, compared with 56% in 1998.

Among women, the ageing profile is more marked and apparent at younger ages, with fewer young grandmothers and more older ones. In 2009 34% of women aged 50 to 54 are grandmothers, compared with 41% in 1998. There has also been a significant increase in the proportion of older women who are grandparents, 78% of those aged over 75 in 2009, rising from 68% in 1998, reflecting the cohort of women who were mothers during the post-war baby boom years now reaching old age.

**There are now fewer younger grandparents and more older ones**

This ageing profile of grandparenting is a reflection both of women giving birth at older ages and grandparents living longer. As people become parents later in life, in turn their parents are likely to become grandparents at older ages. In 1971, the average age of mothers at the birth of a child was 26.5 years, compared with nearly 29.6 in 2009. Over the same period, life expectancy has increased by around three years for women aged 65 and nearly eight years for men<sup>9</sup>, so that the average 65 year old woman can expect to live to age 84 and the average 65 year old man can expect to live to 82.

Graph 3: Proportion of people in different age groups who are grandparents, 1998 and 2009 (base: all grandparents with grandchildren of any age)



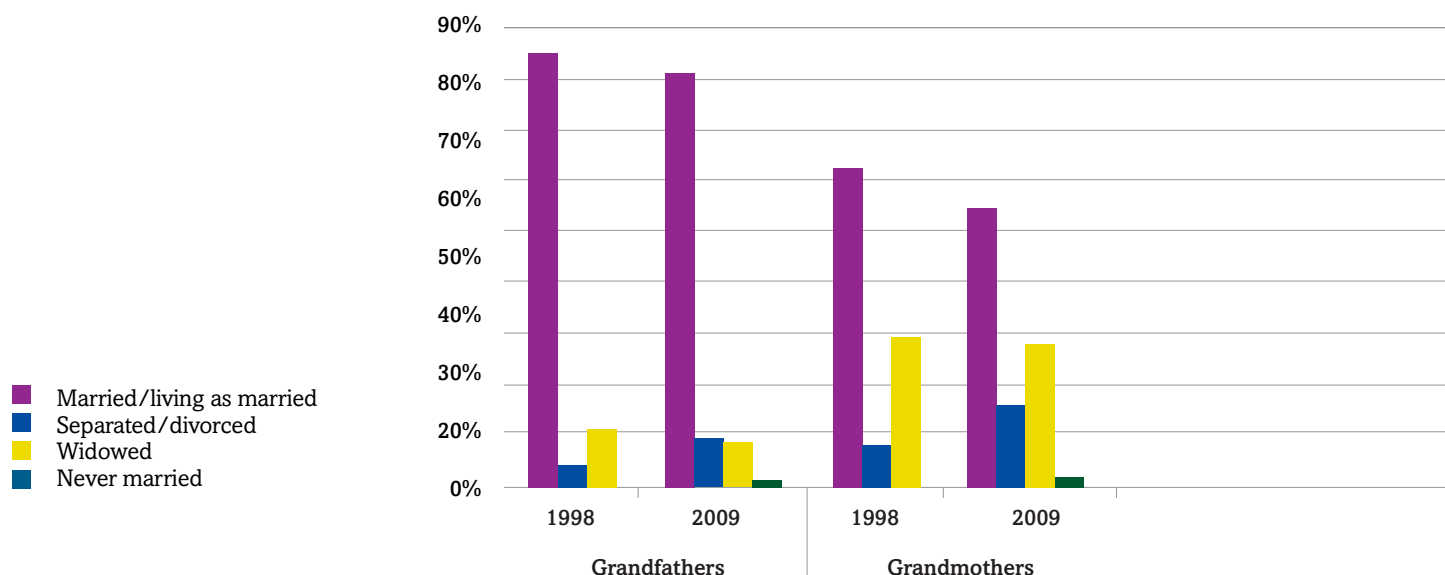
## Marital status of grandparents

### More grandmothers than grandfathers are living alone.

34% of all grandparents are living without a partner (divorced, separated, widowed or never married), but a much higher proportion of grandmothers (45%) than grandfathers (19%). Grandmothers are much more likely to be widowed than men, at 28% compared with just 9%. Grandmothers are also more likely to be separated or divorced – 16% compared with 9% of grandfathers. (This apparently counterintuitive finding may be partly accounted for by some grandfathers never having had contact with their grandchildren, for example if they lost contact with their own children prior to them becoming parents, and also by women tending to live longer, with separated and divorced women outliving their ex-partners and not repartnering.)

Over the past decade, the proportion of grandparents who are married or living as married has fallen, and there has been an increase in the proportion who are divorced or separated. In 2009 81% of grandfathers and 55% of grandmothers were married or living as married, compared with 85% of grandfathers and 62% of grandmothers in 1998. There has been a slight but not statistically significant fall in the proportion of grandparents who are widowed.

Graph 4: Marital status of grandparents, 1998 and 2009  
(base: all grandparents)



## The economic status of grandparents (including those with adult grandchildren)

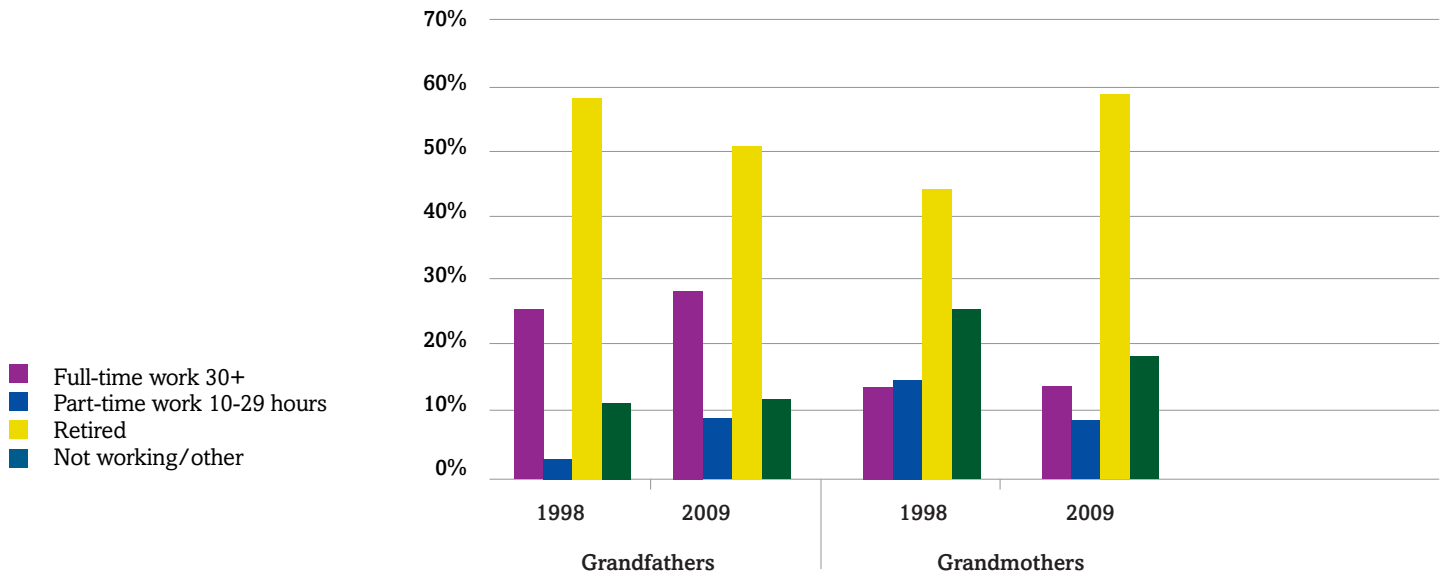
### More grandparents are retired. Fewer grandmothers are working and a growing proportion of grandfathers are working part-time.

Despite the ageing profile, overall around three in 10 (29%) of all grandparents are working, very similar to the proportion in 1998 (29%). Among grandmothers however there has been a significant reduction in the proportion who are working, from 29% in 1998, to 22% in 2009, with a much smaller proportion working part-time. There has also been a significant increase in grandmothers who are retired, from 44% in 1998 to 59% in 2009. Conversely, there has been an increase in the proportion of grandfathers working, with a substantial increase in those working part-time, and a fall in the proportion who are retired, from 59% in 1998 to 51% in 2009. Overall there has been a significant increase in the proportion of grandparents who are retired, from 51% in 1998 to 55% in 2009.

This increase in the proportion of grandparents who are retired and the reduction in the proportion of grandmothers working is a reflection of the ageing profile of grandparenting. Data from the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing (ELSA) shows that rates of employment among older men and women aged 55 to 69 increased between the first wave (2002/3) and the fourth wave (2008/9), however employment rates for both men and but especially women fall sharply between the ages 55-59 and 60-64<sup>10</sup>.

**59% of grandmothers are retired and 51% of grandfathers**

Graph 5: Economic status of grandparents, 1998 and 2009 (base: all grandparents)



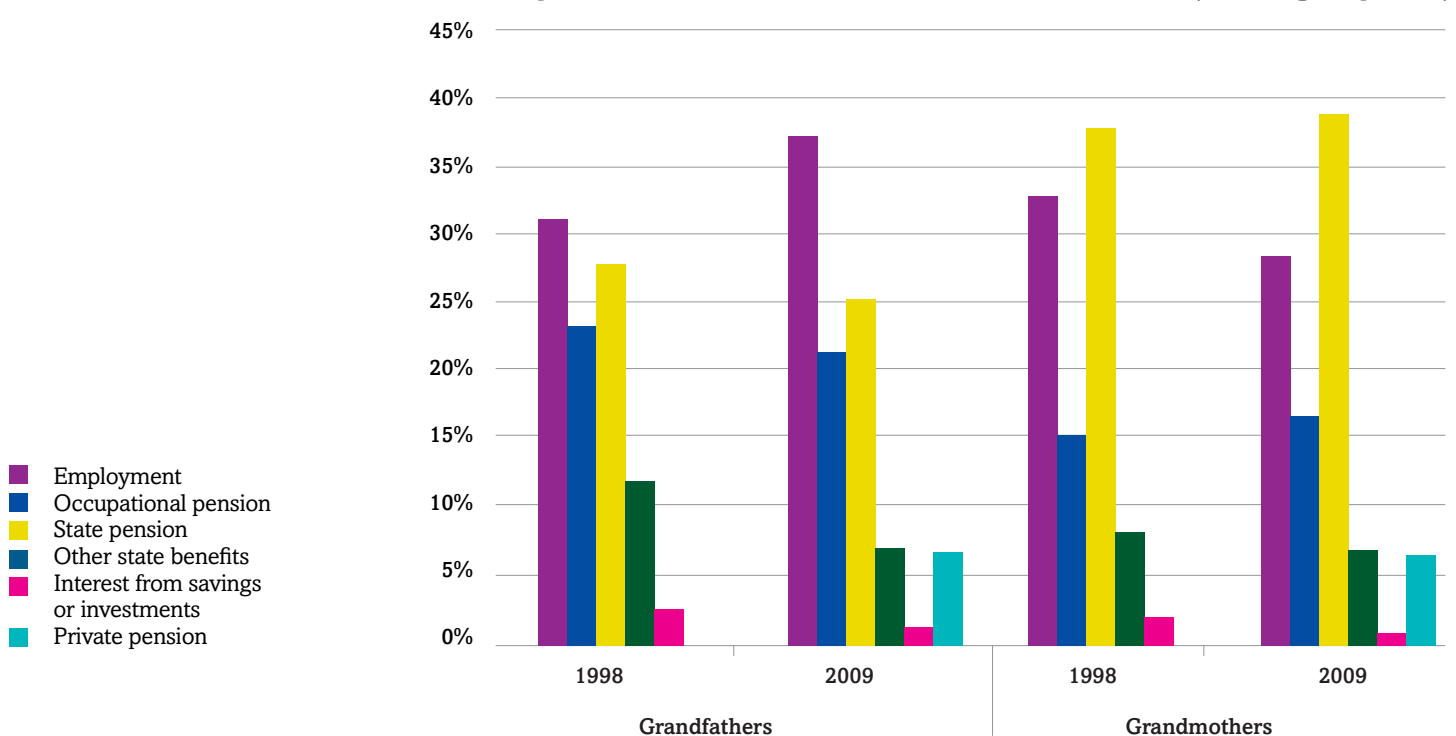
**25% of grandfathers are dependent on the state pension, and 39% of grandmothers**

### Main sources of household income

**Grandmothers are much more dependent on the state pension for their income than grandfathers.**

There has been little change since 1998 in the main sources of household income for grandparents. Earnings from employment are the main source of income for 32% of grandparents in both 1998 and 2009 and the state pension the main source for 34% of grandparents in 1998 and 33% in 2009 and occupational pensions the main source of income for 19% of grandparents in both years. But this hides gender differences, with many more grandmothers than grandfathers dependent on the state pension – 25% of men and 39% of women in 2009. The proportion of grandmothers dependent on the state pension increased slightly between 1998 and 2009, while the proportion living in households receiving income from employment fell significantly. For grandfathers, the proportion dependent on the state pension decreased slightly between 1998 and 2009, and the proportion in households with income from employment rose significantly.

Graph 6: Main source of household income, 1998 and 2009 (base: all grandparents)



## Position of grandparents in the income distribution

### Grandmothers are more likely to be living on low incomes than grandfathers

A comparison of the proportion of adults over the age of 50 who are grandparents in each income quartile suggests that over the past decade grandmothers have tended to become poorer relative to population averages, while grandfathers have become richer. In 2009 a higher proportion of grandmothers are in the bottom half of the income distribution of adults over 50 compared with in 1998. Conversely the proportion of grandfathers in the top half of the income distribution has increased between 1998 and 2009.

In 1998 grandmothers were more likely than grandfathers to be in the top quartile of adults over 50, while by 2009 the position had reversed and grandfathers are more likely to be in the richest quartile. Grandmothers in 2009 are much more likely than grandfathers to be in the poorest quartile. These changes reflect the fact that grandmothers are much more likely than grandfathers to be living without a partner, and much more likely to be dependent on the state pension rather than living in a household with income from employment.

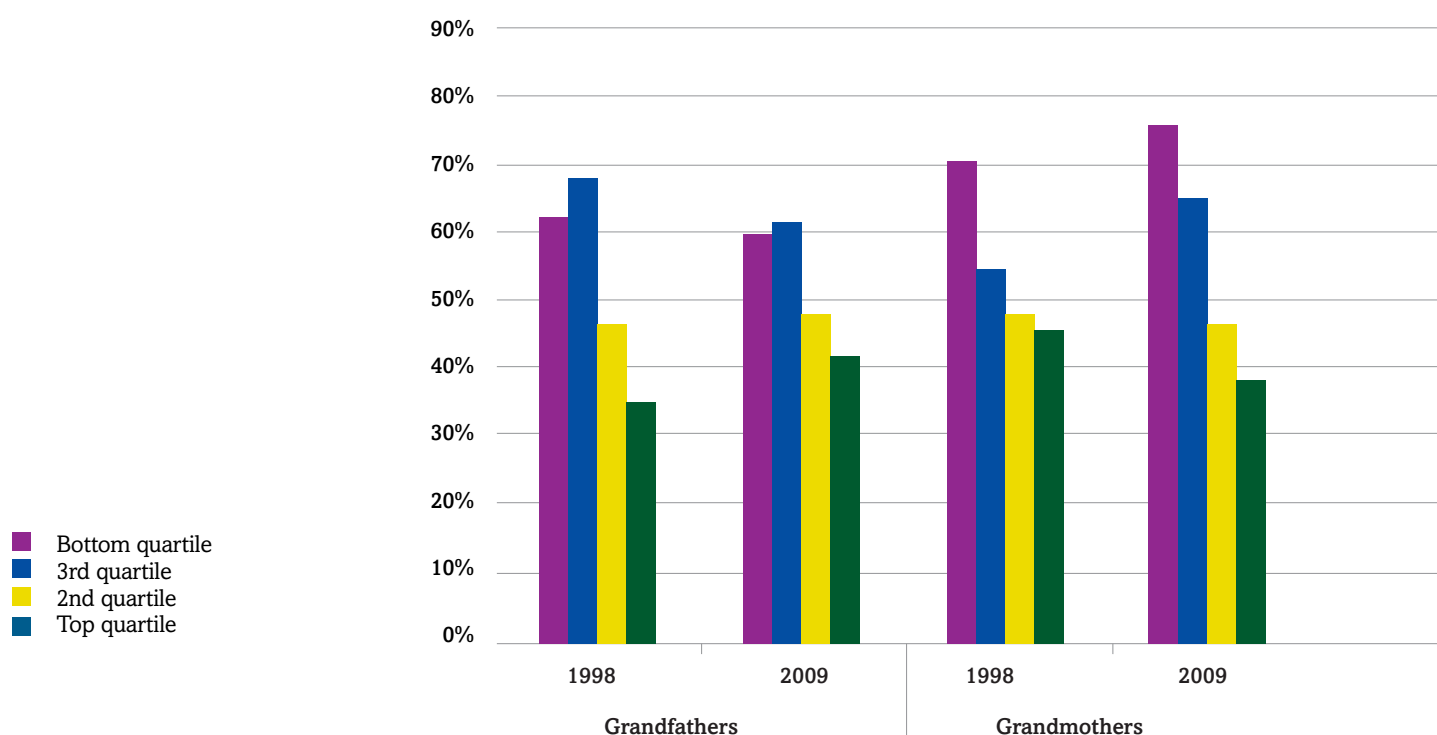
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**Twice as many women pensioners as men are living in poverty**

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BSA data is not equivalised to allow for differences in household sizes, however other data sources which are equivalised suggest that older women are more likely to be on very low incomes than older men. For example, the Households Below Average Income (HBAI) series for 2009/10<sup>11</sup> indicates that more than twice as many women of pension age as men are living on below half median contemporary incomes after housing costs have been deducted (around 650,000 women compared with 300,000 men). However, the overall proportion of pensioners on low incomes has fallen since 1998/9, when 12% of men and 14% of women were living on below half median income after housing costs. In 2009/10 7% of men and 9% of women were living on below half median income after housing costs. Income data on older people aged over 50 from the English Longitudinal Survey of Ageing (ELSA) shows that average incomes have risen (between 2002/3 and 2008/9) substantially, but that income has become more unequally distributed<sup>12</sup>. The ELSA data shows that whilst there is a significant drop in average income on retirement for both sexes, there is no difference in post retirement average income for men and women. The greater likelihood of being on a low income for grandmothers compared with grandfathers revealed in the BSA data reflects the fact that grandmothers are less likely to be working and more likely to be retired.

Graph 7: Grandparents by income quartile, 1998 and 2009 (base: all grandparents)



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**60% of grandfathers and 36% of grandmothers in the “sandwich generation” are working full time**

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**Grandparents in the “sandwich generation”**

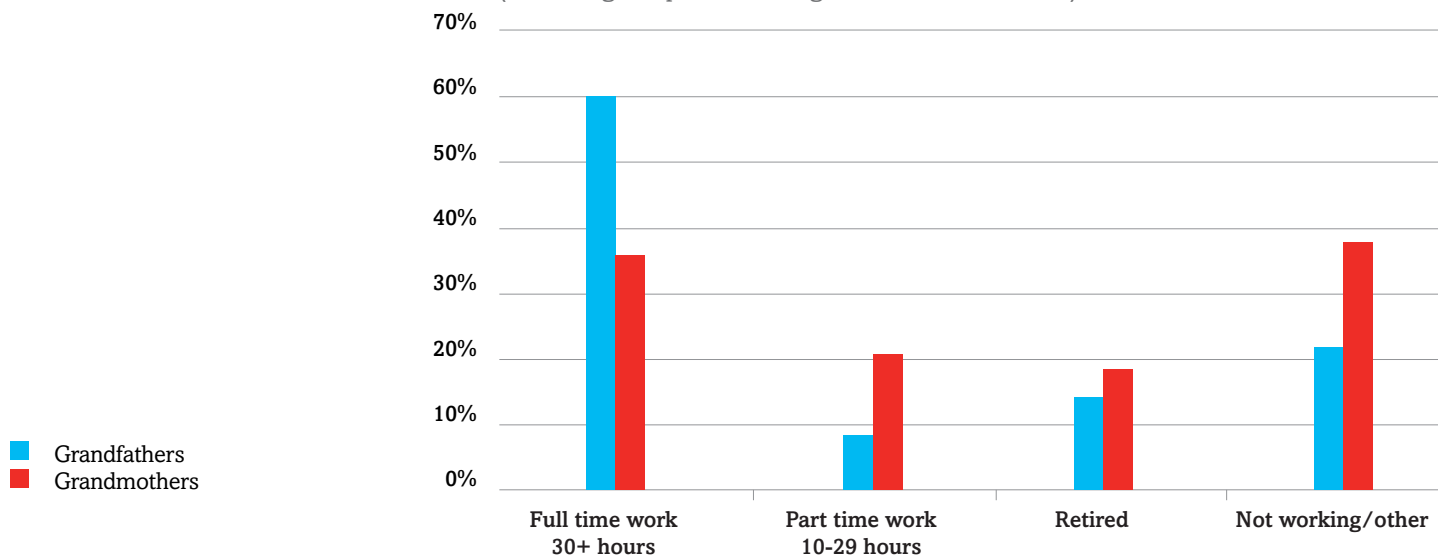
28% of grandparents with grandchildren under the age of 16 are in what is sometimes called the “sandwich generation” - people with both their own parents alive and with grandchildren.

Most grandfathers (60%) in the sandwich generation are working full-time, as are 36% of sandwich generation grandmothers. 14% of grandfathers and 18% of grandmothers whose parents are still alive are retired.

As life expectancy increases, more grandparents are likely to be in the sandwich generation.

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Graph 8: Grandparents with a parent still alive by employment status, 2009  
(base: all grandparents with grandchildren under 16)





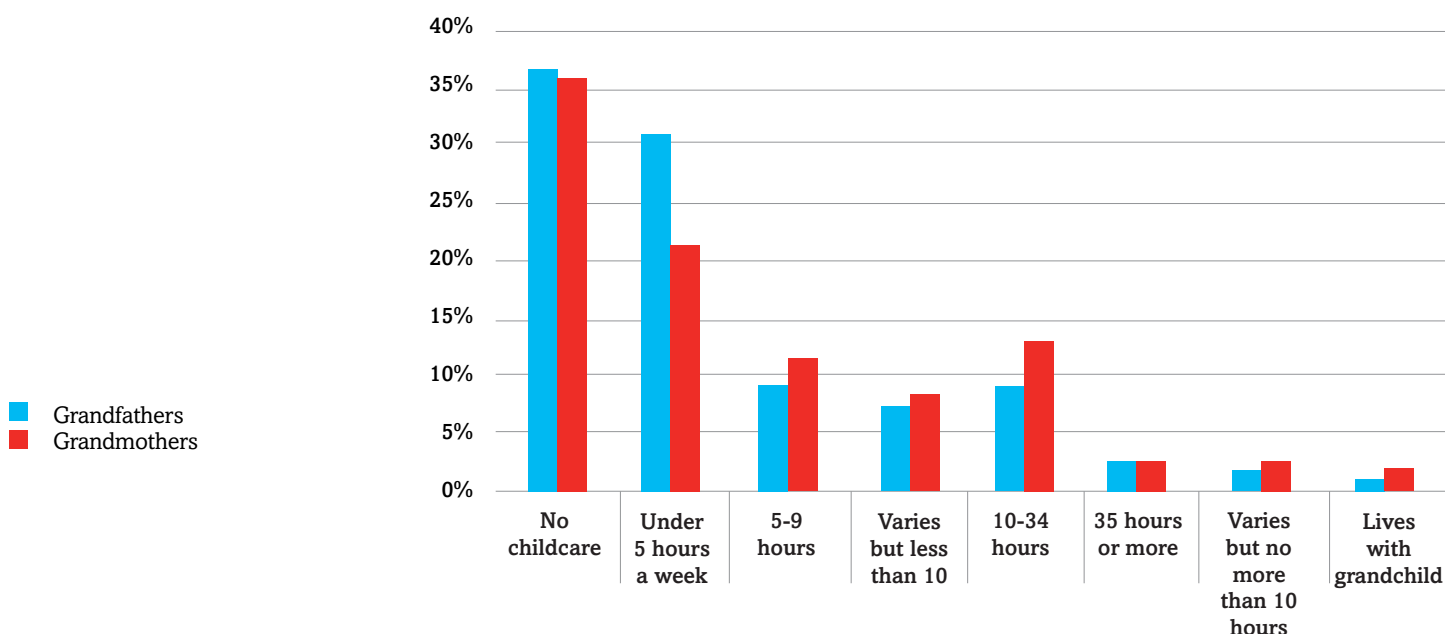
## 4. Grandparents who look after their grandchildren

19% of grandmothers with grandchildren under 16 provide at least 10 hours a week of childcare

In 2009 almost two thirds of grandparents look after their grandchildren, but many more grandmothers than grandfathers are providing higher levels of childcare.

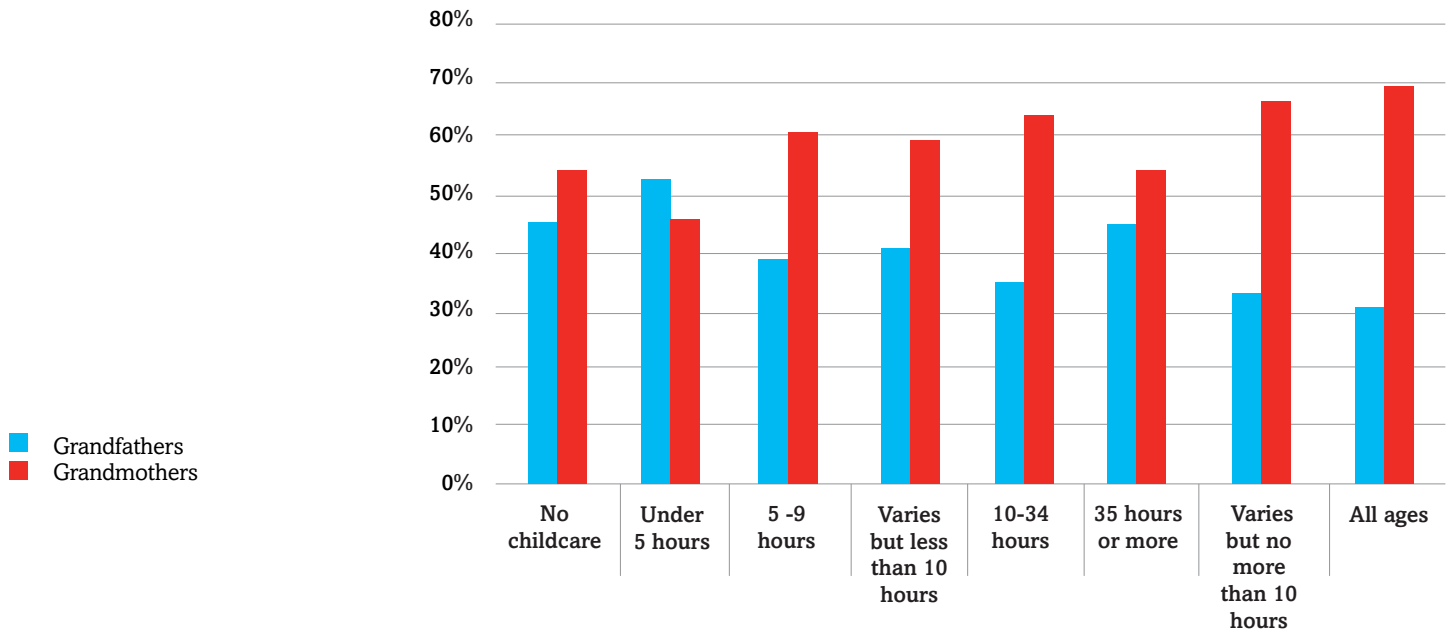
Almost two thirds (63%) of grandparents with grandchildren under 16, around 7 million in total, say they look after their grandchildren, with little difference in the proportion of grandfathers and grandmothers. Grandmothers are likely to be providing higher levels of childcare than grandfathers, with a bigger proportion saying they are providing at least 10 hours a week - 19% of grandmothers, compared with 14% of grandfathers.

Graph 9: Proportions of grandparents who provide childcare by time spent and gender, 2009 (base: grandparents with grandchildren under 16)



However, the greater number of grandmothers than grandfathers in the population, as well as a greater proportion of more intensive childcare being provided by grandmothers, means that many more women than men - approaching double - are providing at least 10 hours of childcare a week. More grandfathers than grandmothers are providing small amounts of care of less than 5 hours a week (see graph 9).

Graph 10: Hours of childcare provide by grandmothers and by grandfathers, 2009 (base: grandparents with grandchildren under 16)

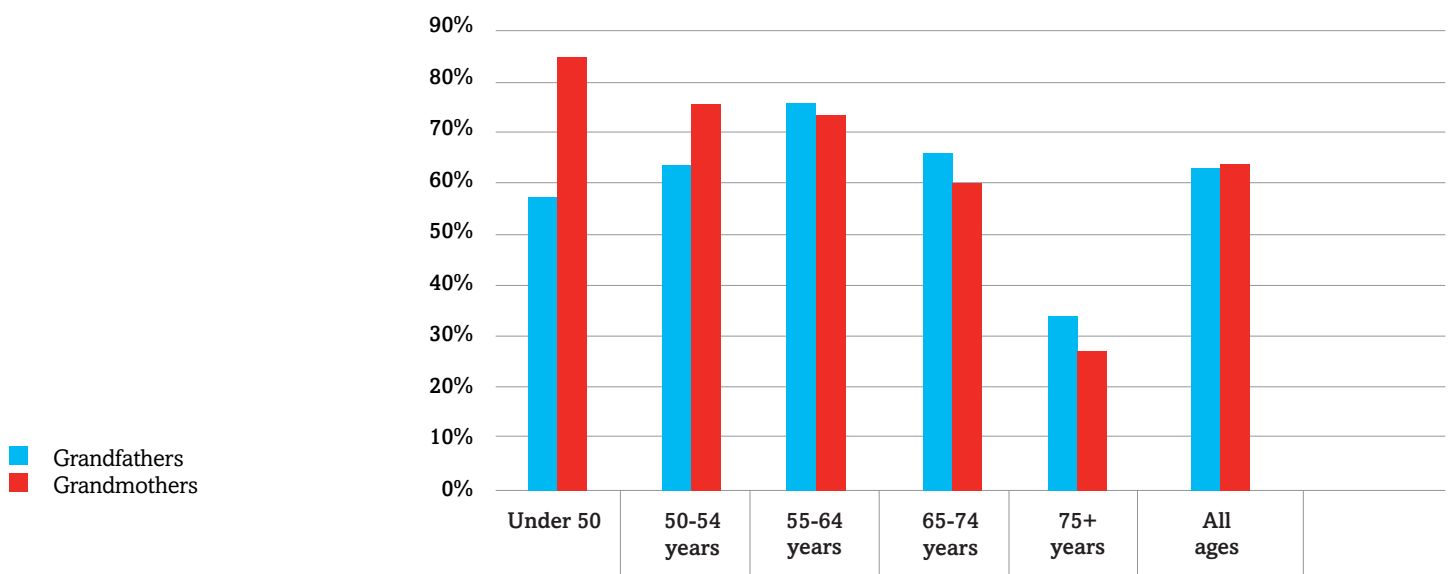


### Ages of grandparents providing childcare

Most childcare is provided by grandparents aged between 55 and 74, with those aged 55 to 64 providing the most, but younger grandmothers aged under 55 are more likely than older grandmothers to look after their grandchildren.

Younger grandmothers are more likely to say they look after their grandchildren than older grandmothers (graph 11). This may reflect the age of grandchildren, with younger grandmothers being more likely to have young grandchildren, and may also reflect a declining ability of grandmothers aged over 75 to provide care. Conversely, younger grandfathers under the age of 55, are less likely to provide childcare than older grandfathers aged 55 to 74.

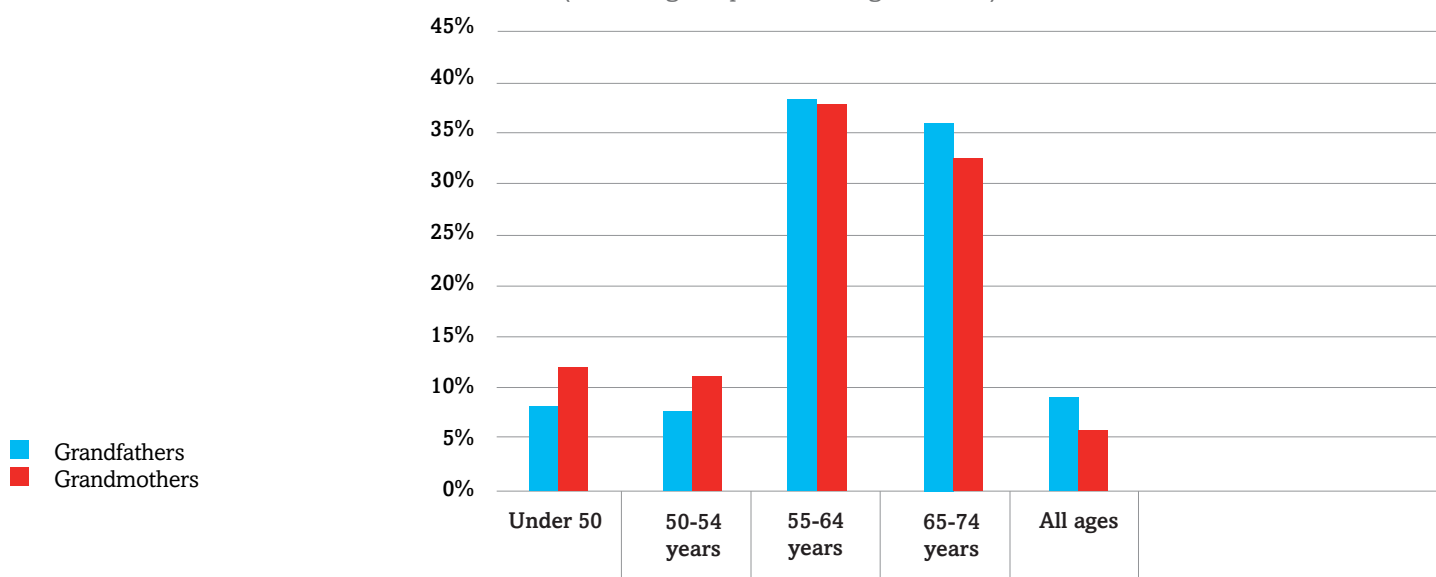
Graph 11: Proportion of grandparents who look after their grandchildren by age, 2009 (base: all grandparents with grandchildren under 16)



Around a third (34%) of those grandmothers who say they look after their grandchildren are providing up to four hours of childcare a week, and 30% provide ten or more hours a week. Younger, working age grandmothers are more likely to be providing more hours of childcare, with the youngest grandmothers, those under the age of 50, the most likely to provide between 10 and 34 hours a week, and those aged 50 to 65 the most likely to be providing 35 hours or more. Older grandmothers over the age of 75 are particularly likely to be providing small amounts of care.

However, by far the largest numbers of both grandmothers and grandfathers who provide childcare are aged between 55 and 74 (graph 12), with slightly more 55 to 64s than 65 to 74s, reflecting the fact that there are many more grandparents in the population of these ages, compared with those under the age of 55. Greater numbers of grandmothers than grandfathers at all ages provide childcare (not shown), except in the 75 plus age group.

Graph 12: Age distribution of grandparents who look after their grandchildren, 2009 (base: all grandparents doing childcare)



**86% of grandfathers who look after their grandchildren are married compared with 62% of grandmothers**

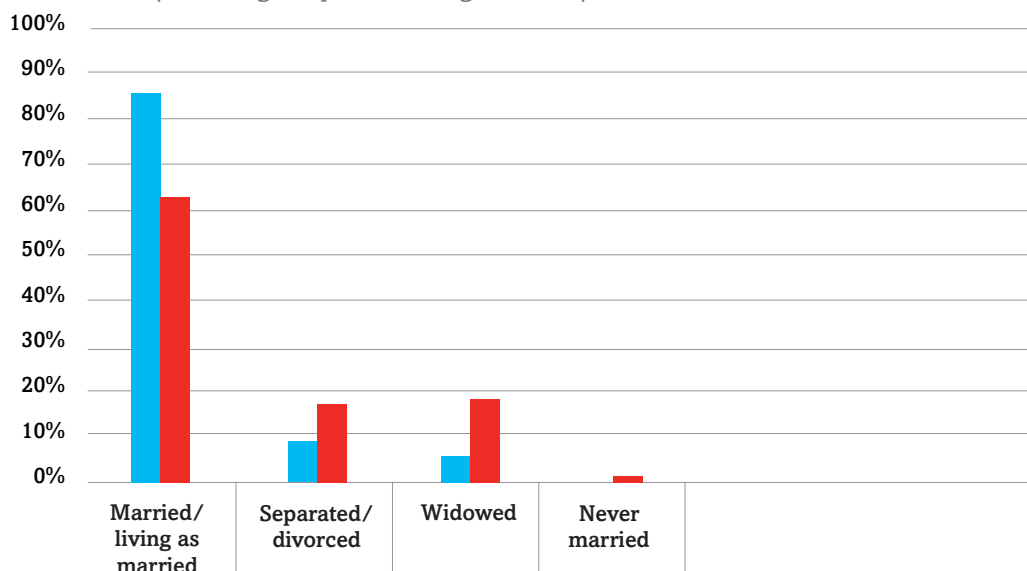
#### Marital status of grandparents who provide childcare

Almost all (86%) grandfathers looking after their grandchildren are married. Grandmothers looking after grandchildren are also most often married (62%), but many more grandmothers who are living without a partner are providing childcare than are grandfathers living without a partner. This finding, coupled with the finding that a high proportion of grandfathers of children under 16 are still working full-time, suggests that the grandfather's role in looking after grandchildren may often be mediated by the presence of a partner.

**Most grandmothers who look after their grandchildren are retired or not working**

■ Grandfathers  
■ Grandmothers

Graph 13: Marital status of grandparents who look after their grandchildren, 2009 (base: all grandparents doing childcare)



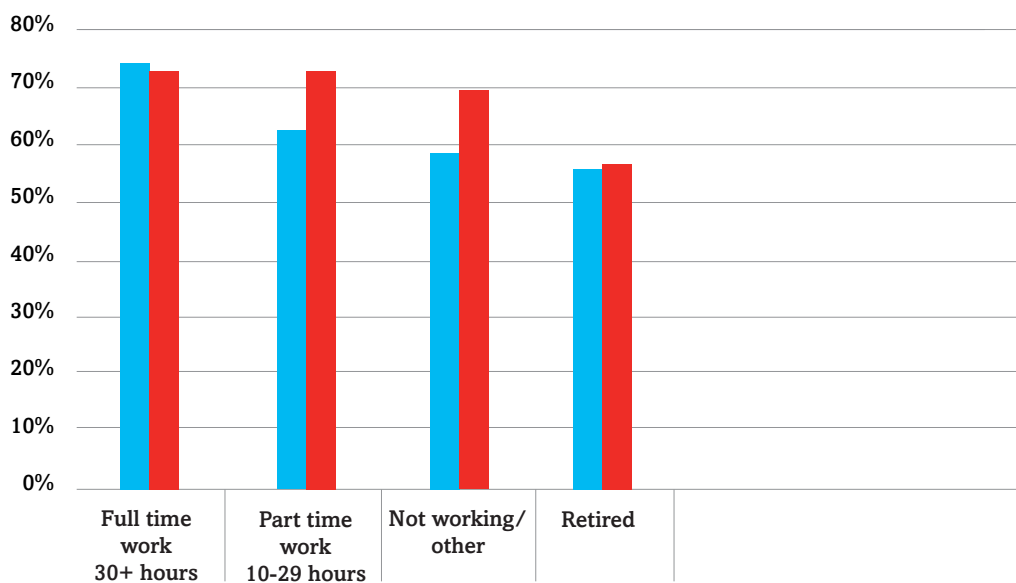
**Economic status of grandparents providing childcare**

**Retired and non-working grandparents provide most childcare overall, but working grandparents are more likely to look after their grandchildren.**

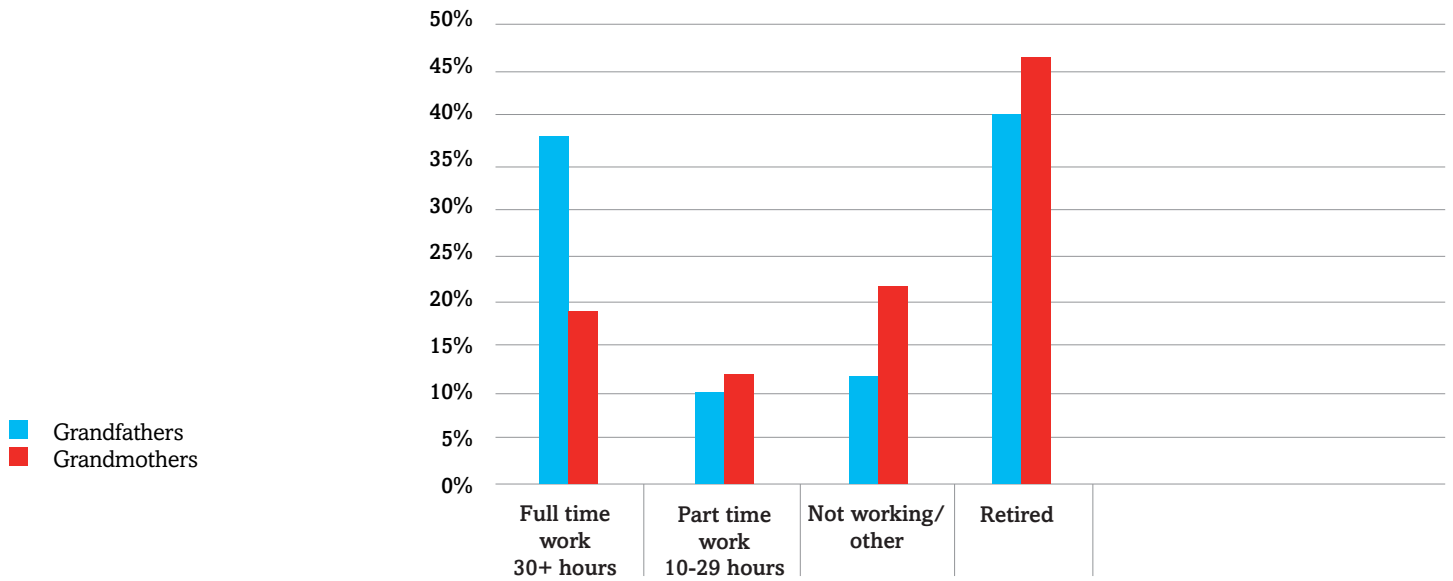
Grandparents who are working – both full-time and part-time – are more likely to say they look after their grandchildren than those who are retired (graph 14). Again this reflects the fact that working grandparents are generally younger and their grandchildren are also younger. Although the proportion of retired grandmothers who look after their grandchildren is lower than the proportion of working grandmothers who do (57% compared with 73%), the number of retired grandmothers who provide child care is much higher than the numbers of grandmothers who are still working (graph 15), because there are many more retired grandmothers in the population overall. However for men, the number of retired grandfathers providing childcare is lower than the number of those who are still working.

Graph 14: Proportion of grandparents who look after their grandchildren by economic status, 2009 (base all grandparents with grandchildren under 16)

■ Grandfathers  
■ Grandmothers



Graph 15: Employment status of grandparents who look after them, 2009  
(base: all grandparents who look after their grandchildren)



**72% of grandparents in the sandwich generation with their parents still alive are providing childcare for their grandchildren**

**Grandparents in the sandwich generation**

72% of grandparents in the sandwich generation with their parents still alive are providing childcare for their grandchildren, with a slightly higher (but not significant) proportion of women (71%) than men (74%) in this category. BSA lacks data on the proportion of people who are providing care for another adult however the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing found that 9.1% of all over 50s interviewed in 2009/10 had provided care in the previous week, most commonly for a partner or parent/parent in law<sup>13</sup>.

As life expectancy increases, the proportion of grandparents in the sandwich generation is likely to increase. This group of usually younger grandparents may be under particular pressure to combine work with childcare as well as looking after elderly parents – truly doing it all. Particularly for this group, the provision of adequate state support for formal childcare, and care for older people, will be vital for their wellbeing and to enable them to stay in the workforce.



# 5. Conclusions

This analysis of BSA data on grandparenting finds that grandparents are getting older and are more likely to be divorced or separated than a decade ago. There are also important gender differences: grandfathers are more likely to be working, and grandmothers are more likely than grandfathers to be dependent on the state pension for their main source of income and more likely to be poor.

By the age of 65 the majority of adults in the population are grandparents. 44% of all grandparents are under the age of 65. 50% of grandparents with grandchildren under the age of 16 are aged under 65.

Grandparents play an important role in providing informal childcare, with almost two thirds providing some childcare. This has been valued as being worth £3.9 billion per year<sup>14</sup>, a major economic contribution to both families and the wider economy. The findings in the report suggest that the £3.9 billion figure significantly underestimates the true value of grandparent childcare today. Much of the childcare provided is to enable parents, especially mothers to work.

Most childcare is provided by grandparents aged between 55 and 74, (with a slightly higher proportion provided by those aged 55 to 64 than those aged 65 to 74,) often grandmothers, who are retired or not working. However, grandparents who are younger and still working are more likely than older retired grandparents to provide childcare, but there are fewer grandparents in the population under the age of 55.

As our population ages, increasing numbers of grandparents will be in the “sandwich generation” with both their own parents alive, and with grandchildren under the age of 16. A high proportion of grandparents in this group are both still working and providing childcare. Policy trends towards older people, especially women, staying in the workplace longer are likely to conflict with the role that grandparents, especially grandmothers, play in providing informal care, both for older relatives or partners and for their grandchildren. At the same time, cuts in state support for childcare, and the declining availability of publicly funded social care, except for those with the highest level of needs<sup>15</sup>, mean that there is an increasing role for the wider family to step in to provide informal care. At the moment, the bulk of informal childcare is provided by grandparents who are aged between 55 and 64, often retired grandmothers. This is the very group who will be increasingly expected to stay in the workforce and who are more likely to have elderly parents (often aged over 80) who may require care and support.

There is an urgent need for policy agendas around employment, pensions, childcare and eldercare to be joined up. Changes in retirement and state pension ages need to take account of the vital role of grandparents in providing childcare, enabling parents to work. Requiring people to work through their sixties is likely to have profound implications for the supply of informal childcare, maternal employment rates and intergenerational relationships within families.

If older people remain longer in the workplace, there is a risk of a serious “care gap” emerging in provision of informal care for children and older people, unless state support for both elder care and childcare is strengthened. Employment policies on flexible working, and extension of parental leave entitlement to grandparents in some circumstances may make it easier for grandparents to combine work with childcare. If grandparents are not available to provide informal childcare, it is likely that increasing numbers of mothers of younger children will leave the workforce. The UK has some of the highest childcare costs in the world<sup>16</sup> and tax credits to help with the cost of childcare for lower income working parents were cut in April 2011. Evidence from the Labour Force Survey indicates that employment rates of younger mothers are beginning to fall, after decades of increasing mothers’ participation rates<sup>17</sup>. This in turn is likely to contribute to increasing child poverty, particularly among single parent households.

Another likely outcome of a failure to provide adequate state support for both childcare and elder care may be more older women leaving the workplace. Given the increased likelihood that grandmothers are single or divorced and at greater risk of poverty, this would be a worrying trend.

Grandmothers are more likely to be dependent on the state pension than grandfathers, and less likely to have income from employment as their main source of income. As a result they are more likely than grandfathers to have an income in the lower half of the income distribution and at greater risk of poverty. It is likely that increasing numbers of men retiring with relatively generous occupational and private pensions, coupled with increasing numbers of divorced or separated grandmothers, will contribute to growing inequality of income between grandfathers and grandmothers. The increased risk of pension age poverty for women compared with men remains despite the introduction of Pension Credit in 2003 to enhance the incomes of the poorest pensioners, which has contributed to an overall fall in the number of older people living in poverty. The proposal to introduce a new flat rate pension based on fewer years of pensions contributions may go some way towards protecting the next generation of grandmothers from poverty, but will not help the present generation of grandmothers. The extension of National Insurance credits for grandparents and other family carers who give up work to look after children will also go some way towards enhancing basic state pension incomes for grandmothers, but is likely to be of little benefit to the growing numbers of grandmothers under the age of 65 who are living without a partner, and who will increasingly be required to remain in the labour market. Lower income working age grandmothers are likely to face a growing squeeze as a result.

## 6. Policy recommendations

1. The important contribution that grandparents make both to their families and to the wider economy by providing informal childcare needs to be valued and supported by both local and central government.
2. Changes in retirement and state pension ages need to take account of the vital role of grandparents in providing childcare, enabling parents to work.
3. Parents should have the option of transferring any unused parental leave to a grandparent who is in work.
4. A significant number of grandparents are combining work with childcare, and this is likely to increase as the state pension age rises. Giving grandparents access to flexible working would help them balance their responsibilities and reduce the risk of them leaving the labour market. We believe that the most effective way to achieve the necessary culture change in the workplace is to extend the right to request flexible working to all.
5. Sure Start children's centres should ensure they are genuinely welcoming to grandparents, and support the role which grandparents play in looking after young children. They should seek to become intergenerational hubs, bringing together people across different age groups.
6. DWP guidance to JobCentre advisors needs to recognise the role that grandparents play in providing childcare and supporting families, and ensure that job seeking requirements do not undermine this.
7. The requirement for grandparents who are registered childminders to look after children who are not their grandchildren should be removed, to give them the same choice over which children they accept as other childminders, and the process for registering as a childminder should be made simpler.
8. Grandparents should not feel obliged to provide childcare because parents cannot afford formal care, and for many parents grandparental childcare is not an option. Central and local government need to ensure that high quality affordable childcare, including nurseries, after school and holiday care and childminding, is available to provide choices for both parents and grandparents.
9. We want to see further exploration of how grandparental care could be recognised, including the question of payment.
10. We want to see a radical overhaul of and greater investment in social care, to provide decent support for elderly and disabled people, and so that family members (who are often themselves grandparents) and are not forced to step in and fill the gap.

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