

Hundred of thousands of children have been left in the unofficial care of relatives, many of whom are suffering severe financial stress with no support – and in some cases outright intimidation – from child protection authorities.

Ties that bind

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Cathy Lang's life is not what she thought it would be. She once had a good job, owned her own home and dreamt of spoiling her grandkids when she retired. Now 61, she's a prisoner of poverty, cramped together with six of those children in public housing.

"A few years ago, my daughter threatened to hurt herself and drove off, so I took [her children] to my place," Lang tells *The Saturday Paper*.

She says her daughter had suffered through violent relationships and struggled with her mental health and drug addiction. Unsure of what to do, Lang called child protection authorities in New South Wales.

"[They] asked me if I could keep the children with me and I said, yes, of course, I wouldn't want them to go somewhere else, they were in enough trauma.

"Then I didn't have any contact from the department at all; they kind of just left me."

Lang was left to raise the children on her own – one was just a baby. Some were later diagnosed with various conditions, including autism and post-traumatic stress disorder.

"Many weeks later when I rang [the department] to ask, they told me they considered the children were in [informal] kinship care and therefore they didn't need to intervene."

Each year there are tens of thousands of children in Australia who need out-of-home care. Some go into residential or foster care, but the bulk rely on relative or kinship care, which can help preserve a sense of family and cultural identity. It is part of the backbone of the child safety system.

Yet many kinship carers and their families across Australia are being broken by financial stress, a lack of access to important services, physical and mental exhaustion, and alleged bullying by some child protection authorities.

The Saturday Paper spoke with dozens of kinship carers in NSW, Victoria, South Australia, Tasmania and Queensland for this story. Most, but not all, are grandparents.

They told of their angst trying to raise children in sometimes oppressive poverty, the hopelessness of feeling abandoned by a system that is supposed to help them, the exhaustion of having to fight for support and the crushing toll on their mental wellbeing. They fear not just for themselves but for the children they love. Some were angry. Many were weary.

In Lang's case, because the department did not intervene after she contacted them, she is classified as an informal kinship carer, meaning she and her family are not formally recognised as part of the out-of-home care system and are ineligible for the state government financial assistance and services offered to those in formal kinship or foster care, including specialised psychological support to address trauma.

It is not a unique scenario, with other informal carers also telling *The Saturday Paper* they felt they couldn't afford to wait for child protection services when they believed a child's life or wellbeing was at risk.

To look after her grandchildren,

Lang had to quit her job and sell her home. She receives fortnightly payments from Centrelink totalling about \$2200, but those funds evaporate quickly with groceries, fuel and other increasing expenses. Each month she chews into her superannuation to cover other costs, including specialists' bills for the children's complex medical needs.

"I'm fearful for my future," she says, clearly exhausted. "I often feel like I'm not enough, that I don't have the resources to do what needs to happen for all of these children all of the time."

What happened to Lang is known in the field as a "drop and run" and happens across the country in various forms, says Sue Erben, a grandmother carer who runs a national kinship carer Facebook group of some 2000 members.

"Because child protection knows the children are with [family], instead of initiating what's necessary to support them, they just say, 'they're safe, see ya, bye!'"

"I got a drop and run," one young carer in Victoria tells *The Saturday Paper*. "They [child protection staff] literally parked ... handed me a baby, said good luck and sped away. Didn't hear from them for weeks."

One informal carer in NSW says she was advised by child protection to go to the federal Family Court to get custody of her granddaughter after she made complaints about her welfare.

"I didn't realise by doing that they would then class us as informal carers and refuse any support at all."

Another in Queensland says staff from the department in his state asked him to look after his newborn grandchild, but since then they have rebuffed his ongoing pleas for recognition and support.

Queensland's child protection department says it has no policy permitting the "drop and run" practice. NSW also denied using it. Their Victorian counterpart did not respond to the question.

Dr Meredith Kiraly, of the University of Melbourne, has spent the past 12 years researching kinship care in Australia and believes "there is pressure on the [child protection] workers to do this".

"For every child that they drop off and don't put on a statutory order and don't pay an allowance, that's one less child in out-of-home care, one less child that appears in the AIHW [Australian Institute of Health and Welfare] figures, and so that looks good."

While those AIHW figures show there are officially about 46,000 children in out-of-home care in Australia, with about half of those in kinship care, Kiraly estimates there are four times as many, about 100,000 children, who are in unrecognised, informal kinship care.

Even with formal recognition, kinship families have reported it can be difficult to access services they are eligible for, or that appropriate services aren't available.

"Where things aren't adequately supported, you get children bouncing around from one place to another," Kiraly says. "When a child goes through those multiple placements, they just end up more traumatised."

Sue Erben says that formal kinship carers are often terrified to disagree with their caseworker, or ask for much, even for services they need.

"We're threatened quite often with



Cathy Lang is raising her six grandchildren in public housing with little support. Nancy Notzon

"These are the most vulnerable kids in our community. We know that their outcomes throughout their lives are likely to be poor if we don't get them the support and help they need."

removal," she says, "and that's happened.

"The departments of child protection are set up to support us ... but it's very rare that you find a case worker who is willing to go above and beyond their manager's desire to support us. They more often than not think we're a part of the problem."

This was the experience of Tanya*. Her home in Victoria was her grandson's world for the first three years of his life until he was suddenly removed from her care.

It was early on a cold morning when child protection staff arrived unannounced at her door to take her sick grandson to visit his father. Tanya, a formal carer, argued with them. "They said I used an aggressive tone and raised a quality-of-care concern," she says, "so they took him ... but he didn't come back."

In an internal review seen by *The Saturday Paper*, the department admits it had no grounds to remove Tanya's grandson, but he still wasn't returned to her care. In a desperate bid for help she turned to the courts.

"I lost my job in the process because I was an emotional wreck," she says. "I had a breakdown. I spent nearly \$50K on the courts, I depleted my savings and was forced to do my own law work."

When approached, the Victorian Department of Families, Fairness and Housing said it could not comment on individual cases.

The general experiences of kinship carers outlined in this article are consistent with new research findings from Southern Cross University, which surveyed 510 kinship carers, 428 of whom were grandparents. Only a fifth of respondents found child protection services helpful or very helpful. About a third found child protection to be very unhelpful.

"What surprised the research team was that government services designed to help were seen by so many as causing further stress," says lead researcher Associate Professor Lynne McPherson.

Meanwhile in South Australia, in a survey of 168 formal kinship and foster carers by The Carer Project, an advocacy movement made up of carers, 106 carers responded that they had experienced bullying, intimidation or repercussions from the Department for Child Protection or their non-government organisation support worker. Of those surveyed, 107 said they resisted making a complaint for fear of retribution.

The department in that state says it takes seriously and investigates allegations of bullying, and an inquiry into formal kinship and foster care in South Australia is currently under way.

Across Australia, the child protection

sector faces many challenges. Resourcing can be a major issue, and as noted in a recent report by the Institute of Child Protection Studies at the Australian Catholic University, "workforce turnover and retention has been a longstanding issue in child welfare, particularly in the statutory context".

Each relevant government department contacted for this story emphasised the important role kinship carers play in the child safety system, and that they do their best to support them.

Several departments noted that kinship care arrangements are often private, and it can be beneficial for child protection services to stay out of the picture. Indeed, many families would agree. But should this preclude informal carers from receiving the support offered to formal carers?

Meredith Kiraly and other advocates have long said that kinship care, excluding child protection, should be considered a national issue.

They argue for an adequate federal support payment for kinship carers not recognised by child protection authorities, and a question added to the census so the true number of kinship carers can be identified. Some believe a national organisation is needed to campaign for such measures.

National Children's Commissioner Anne Hollonds says many of the challenges faced by kinship care can be felt across the out-of-home care system, with informal family carers perhaps "at the bottom of the tree".

"It shouldn't be that way," Hollonds says. "Families should not be exploited when they're taking on children who are traumatised."

"These are the most vulnerable kids in our community. We know that their outcomes throughout their lives are likely to be poor if we don't get them the support and help they need as early as possible. It's clearly a human rights issue for these children."

The wellbeing of disadvantaged children is a "national crisis", the commissioner argues, and should be treated as a policy priority with the establishment of a ministerial child wellbeing taskforce and a minister for children appointed to cabinet.

As one young carer in Queensland put it: "These kids need a chance. Not a chance to go back into the cycle, but a chance to get out." ●

* Name has been changed.