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Study: Children who care for adults spend nearly 2 hours a day as caregivers

By [Fredrick Kunkle](#) October 13, 2014

A new study of Florida middle-schoolers found that kids who are called on [to care for adult family members](#) suffering from diseases or aging-related disabilities spend nearly two hours per weekday providing help, often at the expense of the child's own school work and well-being.

The [young caregivers](#) — 62 percent of whom were girls, compared with 38 percent who were boys — assisted adults in their households by helping them to get around, dressing them, feeding them, giving them medications or performing other tasks. And that, of course, was time the children were not studying or exercising or taking care of themselves, researchers found.

“Our children are sacrificing their academics, their health and well-being in order to provide care,” said Connie Siskowski, a registered nurse who is the founder and president of the Boca Raton-based American Association of Caregiving Youth ([AACY](#)), the study's sponsor.

AACY said the new data only hint at the size of the problem. But it also showed that offering services to support the children and their families can have a favorable impact on the child caregivers, including their graduation rates.

“Our goal is really to raise awareness about this issue, especially in the medical community and the school health community,” said Julia Belkowitz, a physician and assistant professor of pediatrics at the University of Miami's Miller School of Medicine who authored the study. “What we really found is that kids are taking on a lot of responsibility in the home.”

An abstract of the study was discussed Saturday at the American Academy of Pediatrics national conference in San Diego.

It's not clear how many child caregivers there are in the United States. The last time [a national survey](#) was done was 2005, Siskowski said. In that study, the National Alliance for Caregiving found at least 1.3 million children between the ages of 8 and 18 were caregivers, or more than the total of elementary and secondary school students in New York, Chicago and the District.

If anything, trends show that the phenomenon has spread since the last recession among [multigenerational families](#) where both parents work and a child is called up to assist another adult, Siskowski said. It can also be expected to grow as the population ages.

In the latest survey, researchers focused on child caregivers in Palm Beach County, Fla., whose demographics are in line with U.S. averages.

Palm Beach County's approximately 1.4 million people are nearly 77 percent white, 19 percent black and about 20 percent Latino, which overlaps with other races. The median household income is \$52,806, census data show. About 14 percent live below the poverty line.

Around the United States, the population is about 78 percent white, 13 percent black and 17 percent Latino. Median household income is \$53,046. And about 15 percent are below the poverty line.

Researchers looked at eight Palm Beach County middle schools and examined about 550 intake forms submitted to the AACY by youth caregivers, along with about 200 family intake forms completed when social workers conducted home visits with the families.

To meet the criteria for screening, the children had to live in homes where there was a medical diagnosis that affected at least one adult, such as heart disease, diabetes or Alzheimer's disease. The survey did not take into account homes where a child might be babysitting a sibling or another child, Siskowski said.

The young caregivers reported spending a median of 2.5 hours each school day as a caregiver and four hours each weekend. Estimates reported by family members were slightly lower, at 1.5 hours on weekdays and 2.25 hours on weekends.

But the study also documented that support services made available by the organization — such as tutoring, skills-building classes and activities designed to give the kids a break and have fun — had a beneficial impact.

Siskowski said other countries, such as Canada, [do a better job](#) of identifying and intervening to help children caregivers. Her hope is that the study will generate more interest and intervention for children caregivers.

“With support, their lives transform,” Siskowski said.