

# When Mamaw Becomes Mom: Social Capital and Kinship Family Formation amid the Rural Opioid Crisis



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*Amid the opioid crisis, the number of kinship families—or children living with relatives—has risen dramatically, particularly in rural communities. Using in-depth interviews with relative caregivers and local legal actors in Appalachian Kentucky, I consider how rural kinship families are formed. I demonstrate how relatives' experiences depend on the social capital they hold with local legal actors who regulate kinship care. Whether a relative possesses positive, negative, or no social capital with these actors affects their ability to secure their ideal legal arrangement and the level of surveillance they must endure. These findings illuminate how seemingly rigid legal processes can reproduce inequalities in rural jurisdictions. In this case, the unequal distribution of legal-specific social capital precipitates different levels of stability and support afforded to rural kinship families.*

**Keywords:** child welfare, kinship care, opioid crisis, rural communities, social capital

Over the course of the twenty-first century, the United States has experienced a widespread and increasingly deadly opioid crisis. By 2020, opioid-related overdose deaths had increased by more than 800 percent, reaching a peak of nearly seventy thousand deaths in 2020 (Ahmad, Rossen, and Pegram 2021). Even more are currently navigating opioid use disorders (OUD). In 2019, an estimated 9.7 million people misused prescription opioids, and 745,000 used heroin (SAMHSA 2020). Rates of OUD and opioid-related overdose have increased across age groups but have been consistently highest for individuals ranging from twenty-five to

forty-four years old—peak childbearing and parenting age (Scholl et al. 2019).

Although the opioid crisis has affected communities across the United States, certain rural regions—such as Central Appalachia—have been particularly affected (Rigg, Monnat, and Chavez 2018). These regions not only experienced the highest opioid prescribing rates, creating large local supplies of opioids (McDonald, Carlson, and Izrael 2012), but also faced structural challenges—such as lack of access to mental health care—which created high local demand (Keyes et al. 2013; Monnat and Rigg 2018). As economic restructuring produced

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grave economic shifts in single-industry labor markets, scholars have also suggested that opioids may have offered a refuge from hopelessness and despair (Case and Deaton 2015; Dasgupta, Beletsky, and Ciccarone 2018). And beyond seeing some of the highest rates of OUD, rural areas have also tended to criminalize and stigmatize OUD more so than cities (Beety 2019).

In these rural places where OUD is both prevalent and criminalized, increasing numbers of children whose parents use drugs are now in kinship care—meaning they live with and are primarily cared for by relatives, such as aunts and uncles, grandparents, siblings, and family friends (Anderson 2019; Contreras, Villarreal, and Cohen 2021). In 2020, the number of children in kinship families reached an all-time high of 2.7 million (Annie E. Casey Foundation 2020). An extensive literature has explored the unique financial, psychological, and social challenges that relative caregivers face (Dunifon 2018). More recently, scholars have turned to consider such challenges in the context of the opioid crisis (Davis et al. 2020; Dolbin-Macnab and O’Connell 2021). Much less is known about how caregivers understand and navigate the legal processes that formalize and regulate kinship care (Pittman 2014). I extend this line of research to consider how rural relatives are navigating the assumption of a primary caregiving role of a relative child—what I call kinship family formation—amid the opioid crisis.

This study uses qualitative data collected in Appalachian Kentucky—a rural region often considered the epicenter of the opioid crisis (Quinones 2015; Macy 2018). Not only has this region witnessed some of the highest rates of OUD and opioid overdose deaths (Rigg, Monnat, and Chavez 2018), it has also responded to the opioid crisis in a particularly punitive manner, arresting and prosecuting substance use at

high rates (Spalding 2017). Consequently, local school staff in the region estimate that as many as 40 percent of students are being raised by a relative caregiver.<sup>1</sup> I draw on fifty in-depth interviews with relative caregivers and forty-seven with actors in the local legal systems that regulate kinship families.

Caregivers’ experiences navigating kinship family formation vary by a specific form of social capital derived from their relationships with key local legal actors. In this case, those key local legal actors include street-level bureaucrats and decisionmakers within the legal systems that govern kinship family formation, such as judges and child welfare case workers. The symbolic resources derived from these actors include direct assistance—such as approaching the county attorney to file for emergency custody—and surety of positive outcomes—for example, knowing a judge will grant you legal custody on the basis of your reputation or relationship. Caregivers with positive connections can draw on their positive social capital to secure their ideal legal arrangement while minimizing the level of surveillance they must endure.<sup>2</sup> Conversely, caregivers with negative connections may not only lack the power to secure their ideal legal arrangement but also attract unwanted and intrusive surveillance and punishment. Because such social capital is specific to place—derived from relationships to specific legal actors who operate within a given jurisdiction—caregivers may benefit from positive social capital in their home communities but find themselves lacking these advantages if their cases are located elsewhere.

These findings add nuance to our understanding of how the opioid crisis has affected rural families. Although scholars have proven that the opioid crisis has increased the prevalence of kinship families in rural areas (Anderson 2019; Contreras, Villarreal, and Cohen 2021), detailed the challenges such rural fami-

1. This statistic is collected by the Census Bureau at the state level, but no database tracks at the county level.
2. Kinship families possess different legal arrangements, ranging from formal legal custody or adoption to informal situations that lack legal recognition. Different arrangements may be preferred by different families based on their own circumstances. Within formal arrangements, kinship families will be given orders and monitored by the child welfare system and the court. The level of such surveillance can vary, based on the discretion of these local legal actors. Higher surveillance is more likely to lead to punishment, as legal actors are more likely to find a relative disobeying an order if they are given more orders and monitored more closely.

lies face (Hansen et al. 2020), and explored the coping mechanisms they use to traverse such challenges (Dunfee, Brown, and Schoenberg 2020), existing work has not considered the possible variation across these families' experiences. My findings demonstrate how rural families are unequally equipped to navigate kinship family formation amid parental opioid use. Social capital can benefit caregivers with positive connections to local legal actors but harm caregivers with negative connections—ultimately leading to differing levels of stability and support. Local legal actors who have worked in both rural and nonrural legal systems suggest that such a dynamic is less salient or common in the urban context, as individual caregivers are unlikely to know the specific local legal actors relevant to their case.

These findings also contribute to our understanding of rural legal systems more generally (Pruitt 2007; Pruitt and Showman 2014). Because of low population sizes in rural legal jurisdictions, people are more likely to know not simply the legal actors who regulate kinship family formation but also those who execute other legal processes. The social capital individuals hold with local legal actors therefore likely matters not only for child custody shifts but for other legal processes—like applying for disability assistance, facing a criminal charge for drug possession, or contesting an eviction. Ultimately, this study not only points to the inequalities created and perpetuated among rural families during the opioid crisis; it also sheds light on the ways that rurality impacts people's navigation of legal processes.

### **RELATIVE CAREGIVERS AND KINSHIP FAMILY FORMATION**

In both urban (Stack 1974) and rural (Duncan 1999) contexts, research has illuminated the numerous forms of social support provided by kin networks. One such form is childrearing assistance. Parents, for example, may choose to live in multigenerational or extended family households as an “adaptive strategy” (Moen and Wethington 1992) amid economic challenges to lessen childcare cost burdens (Cross 2018; Pilkauskas and Cross 2018). Rural residents are even more likely than nonrural residents to re-

side in such nontraditional households, as kin support can close the resource gaps in rural communities lacking organizational infrastructure (Brown and Lichter 2004; Barnett 2008; Yancura et al. 2020).

Yet family members may also take on primary caregiving roles when parents are not able to, perhaps due to health issues or incarceration. Research tends to focus on skipped-generation households, in which grandparents serve as primary caregivers (Dunifon 2018); however, a much broader pool of relatives may step into these roles, including aunts and uncles, cousins, siblings, and family friends (Zinn 2010). Transitioning a child to a relative-headed household—a “kinship family”—can again serve as a type of family adaptive strategy, whereby a relative can both support the parent and protect the child (Gleeson et al. 2009).

The state, however, may also call on relatives when seeking to remove a child from their parents, such as in instances of parental substance use (Crumbley and Little 1997). In these situations, the state initiates the creation of kinship families. In doing so, the state draws on the power of kin networks (Berrick 1998) while infiltrating and exploiting organic family support structures (Roberts 2001). The state enforces a transition that families may have made independently, potentially adding unnecessary intrusion and rigidity (Brown, Cohon, and Wheeler 2002).

Although kinship families may look the same—a relative head of household and no biological parent present—they take on diverse legal arrangements when formed. Relatives may serve as informal caregivers or guardians while legal custody remains with the biological parent; they may become legal custodians, suspending the biological parent's rights; they may adopt, terminating the parent's rights; or they may serve as relative foster parents while the state holds legal custody. Although the family initiates informal caregiving and the state initiates foster parenting, either party may initiate custody shifts and adoption. These legal arrangements dictate both the resources available to caregivers and their control in these roles (Pittman 2015). Arrangements that provide greater financial resources require caregiv-

ers to endure more intense surveillance and cede greater control over their families to the state (Mandelbaum 1995; Roberts 2001; Rankin 2002; Goodman et al. 2004).

Despite ample research on the outcomes of relative caregivers and their children, much less is known about how caregivers form kinship families. In one of few studies on the topic, LaShawnDa Pittman (2014) considers how Black custodial grandmothers in Chicago engage in “institutional decision making” to choose the legal arrangement best for their family. She finds that grandmothers’ decisions hinge on how parents respond to the grandmothers’ attempts to take on caregiving roles. Such decision making enables these grandparents to exert agency and achieve family stability, despite the disadvantages and challenges they face.

I extend this line of research to consider how rural relative caregivers navigate kinship family formation. Do all rural caregivers possess this power to choose the ideal legal arrangement for their family? If not, who does and does not possess this agency, and why?

### NAVIGATING RURAL LEGAL SYSTEMS

In executing and navigating legal processes, both legal actors and everyday citizens draw on their “legal consciousness,” that is, their commonsense understanding of the law (Ewick and Silbey 1998). Across diverse legal contexts, from cockfighting (Young 2014) to welfare receipt (Sarat 1990), scholars show how legal consciousness structures people’s interactions with the law and legal actors. For example, legal consciousness can affect whether someone will report street harassment (Nielsen 2000) or try to evade paying taxes (Cornut St-Pierre 2019).

Scholars have found that legal consciousness varies by factors such as race and class, given that unequal experiences create varying levels of trust in the legal system and differing senses of entitlement (Merry 1990; Young and Billings 2020). Such differences in legal consciousness can ultimately lead to unequal legal outcomes because legal systems privilege cer-

tain interaction styles over others. For example, in his study of an urban criminal court, Matthew Clair (2020) finds that middle-class defendants tend to trust their lawyers on the basis of cultural similarities, whereas lower-class defendants have developed mistrust in response to a lifetime of surveillance and criminalization. Consequently, whereas middle-class defendants defer to their lawyers, lower-class defendants may withdraw from them—ultimately leading to worse outcomes.

Yet legal consciousness also differs based on context—for example, across urban and rural communities. Considering legal actors, Ke Li (2016) demonstrates how rural Chinese lawyers are often socially connected to their clients and adversaries because of low population sizes. Such social ties affect these lawyers’ decisions as to whether to extend or withhold legal services to a potential disputant; their case screening is socially motivated. Considering everyday citizens, Lisa Pruitt (2007, 2008) argues that the rural context can affect whether rural women report domestic violence. These women may choose not to seek help if they believe that law enforcement or support services might know the perpetrator and either delegitimize or deny their experiences.

If the low populations and social connectedness of the rural context shape how people understand and utilize the law, then we might imagine how rural relative caregivers’ navigation of kinship family formation could be affected by such features as well. In the analysis that follows, I investigate this premise using interviews with both rural relative caregivers and the local legal actors that regulate kinship family formation in their communities.

### RESEARCH DESIGN

This study draws on qualitative data from Appalachian Kentucky—a rural region within Central Appalachia.<sup>3</sup> Central Appalachia is often considered the epicenter of the opioid crisis (Quinones 2015; Macy 2018) because it was characterized by a perfect storm of conditions that made residents susceptible to opioid dependence. For decades, Central Appalachia was oc-

3. The Appalachian region extends from Mississippi to New York. Central Appalachia includes West Virginia, eastern Kentucky, southeastern Virginia, and northeastern Tennessee.

cupied by extractive coal industries, which controlled local governments and stifled economic growth (Gaventa 1980; Eller 1982, 2008). When the coal industry fell into decline, not only did high-paying jobs disappear, but so did workers' identities (Lewin 2019). Given the economic and social despair these industries left behind and particularly high opioid prescribing rates, Appalachian Kentucky witnessed one of the largest increases in the incidence of OUD (Wilt, Lewis, and Adams 2019).

Coincidentally, this region has also seen one of the largest increases in the prevalence of kinship care (Annie E. Casey Foundation 2020). From 2013 to 2017, the number of Kentucky children in kinship care increased by 75 percent (KYA 2018). This increase is partly due to overdose deaths but also a result of the increased punishments for parents who use opioids. From 2013 to 2017, low-level drug-related offenses propelled a 31 percent increase in Kentucky's jail population (Spalding 2017), creating some of the highest parental incarceration rates in the United States (KYA 2020). Even if an arrest does not result in sustained jail time, the state can still remove children for parental substance use alone (KYA 2018). Relatives may also choose to initiate kinship care independently, fearing that child welfare involvement would eventually be inevitable.

Rather than focusing on a single community, my interview sample includes respondents from several counties across the region. On the one hand, focusing on the region as a whole best protects the identities of a vulnerable group of respondents. Yet it also ensures that findings are not specific to the particularities of a single county's legal system. Because it is the low population size and social connectedness of rural areas that shapes rural legal consciousness (Li 2016; Pruitt 2007, 2008), including rural counties of varying sizes and distances to the nearest metropolitan area (Economic Research Service 2021) ensures that I can identify themes common across counties while keeping an eye to potential variation.

## Data and Methods

This study draws on in-depth interviews with fifty relative caregivers and forty-seven local legal actors who regulate kinship families.<sup>4</sup> I first recruited caregivers by visiting support groups hosted by schools and community-based organizations. After potential respondents provided their contact information, I followed up to set up private one-on-one interviews at a location of the respondent's choice, or via phone or FaceTime. This method, however, reached only families who are more connected to information and a support network. Therefore, starting with those recruited through support groups, I used snowball sampling, asking respondents to connect me with other kinship families (Weiss 1995). This strategy enabled me not only to reach respondents who were more isolated, but also to approach these families with familiarity and trust (Atkinson and Flint 2001).

Key characteristics of the sample of relative caregivers are summarized in table 1. The sample reflects the diversity of this population, including grandparents, great-grandparents, aunts and uncles, great-aunts and great-uncles, and fictive kin (that is, family friends). These caregivers had a variety of legal arrangements—from informal care to adoption, were from a range of class backgrounds—from those receiving only social welfare benefits to those who work as lawyers and teachers, and represented a large range of ages—from twenty-seven to eighty years old. Reflecting the demographics of a largely racially homogenous region, these caregivers were all White.

Interviews with these relative caregivers ranged from forty-five minutes to three hours in length. Interviews were generally open ended; I asked relatives to share their caregiving stories, and I probed to fill in the gaps in these stories along the way. All interviews covered typical demographic information, observations of the caregiver's community, relationships with the biological parent or parents, experiences with law enforcement and the criminal justice system, experiences with the

4. This article derives from a larger study, for which I also conducted ethnographic observation, interviews with parents who use or used drugs, and interviews with other (nonlegal) service providers. This article uses only the two subsets of data described here.

**Table 1.** Summary of Sample of Relative Caregivers ( $n = 50$ )

Characteristic of Relative Caregiver	$n$
<b>Relationship of caregiver to children</b>	
Grandparent or step-grandparent	32
Great-grandparent	5
Great-aunt or great-uncle	4
Aunt or uncle	3
Fictive kin	6
<b>Household arrangement</b>	
Only adult in house	13
Resides with at least one other adult	37
<b>Legal status of kinship arrangement</b>	
Informal arrangement or guardianship	9
Legal custody	30
Adoption	4
State custody (caregiver is a foster parent)	3
Some combination of the above	4
<b>Process of kinship family formation</b>	
State-initiated	21
Family-initiated	23
Both	6

Source: Author's tabulation of primary data.

Note: All characteristics are at the time of the interview. Some caregivers, for example, cared for a child informally before receiving legal custody later.

child welfare system, and access to financial and social support. I recorded interviews with a digital recorder, and after each interview took notes describing settings, facial or body language, and other interactions not picked up by the recording (Weiss 1995).

These interviews with relative caregivers also informed me on whom to include in my sample of local legal actors. Although I did not set out to conduct interviews with this group, it became evident that such data could provide useful perspectives for cross-validation. While interviewing relative caregivers, I took note of the legal actors they discussed when recounting their caregiving experiences. I then purposively designed a sample to include these different types of actors, contacting people in these roles in the caregivers' communities. The

**Table 2.** Summary of Sample of Legal Actors ( $n = 47$ )

Type of Legal Actor	$n$
<b>Judges</b>	
District court judge	8
Circuit court judge	3
Family court judge	2
Drug court administration	3
<b>Prosecutors</b>	
Commonwealth's attorney	2
County attorney	3
<b>Public defenders</b>	
Staff attorney	4
Social worker	1
<b>Law enforcement</b>	
Police chief	2
<b>Legal aid</b>	
Staff attorney	2
<b>Protection and permanency (child welfare system)</b>	
Office supervisor	9
Case worker	2
<b>Case planning services</b>	
Parenting class instructors	2
<b>Family Support (social welfare system)</b>	
Office supervisor	2
<b>Child support enforcement</b>	
Office supervisor	2

Source: Author's tabulation of primary data.

final sample, summarized in table 2, included child welfare case workers, public defenders, legal aid attorneys, prosecutors, judges, and child support workers, among others. These interviews ranged from thirty minutes to one hour in length and focused on how the respondent's respective institution views and interacts with kinship families.

I consider both sets of interviews to be ethnographic, given that they are situated within my observations living in the region and volunteering with institutions that serve both parents who use or used opioids and relative caregivers (Rinaldo and Guhin 2019). Such context informed the questions I asked respondents,

strengthened my ability to understand their circumstances, and enabled me to build trust and rapport. My local presence and knowledge were particularly useful for connecting with relative caregivers, many of whom were wary of governmental actors and academic researchers. Further, my visits to support groups introduced me to many respondents prior to their interviews, often providing me with context about respondents' situations that facilitated our conversations.

In conducting the interviews, I used sequential interviewing, drawing on each respondent to garner a deeper and more complete understanding of how relative caregivers were navigating their new caregiving roles, and how local legal actors shaped that process (Weiss 1995; Small 2009). Although I began by interviewing relative caregivers, I eventually conducted interviews with both samples simultaneously. Thus I could probe new topics with each group based on what I learned from the other. For example, as relatives explained how they approached county attorneys for help in their child custody cases, I then turned to county attorneys to ask who approaches them for help and how they proceed in these situations.

As data collection continued, I also transcribed and coded interviews along the way, writing memos on the themes that arose. Because I was initially interested in how rurality and place affected people's experiences—both as relative caregivers and as legal actors—I began coding with a primary code of “rurality.”<sup>5</sup> I later developed a secondary code, “connections with legal actors,” and finally tertiary codes notating “positive connections,” “negative connections,” and “lack of connections.” I continued this interwoven process of caregiver interviews, legal actor interviews, and analysis until my understanding of how social capital shaped kinship family formation had stabilized (Patton 1980; Sandelowski 1995).

### **SOCIAL CAPITAL AND RURAL KINSHIP FAMILY FORMATION**

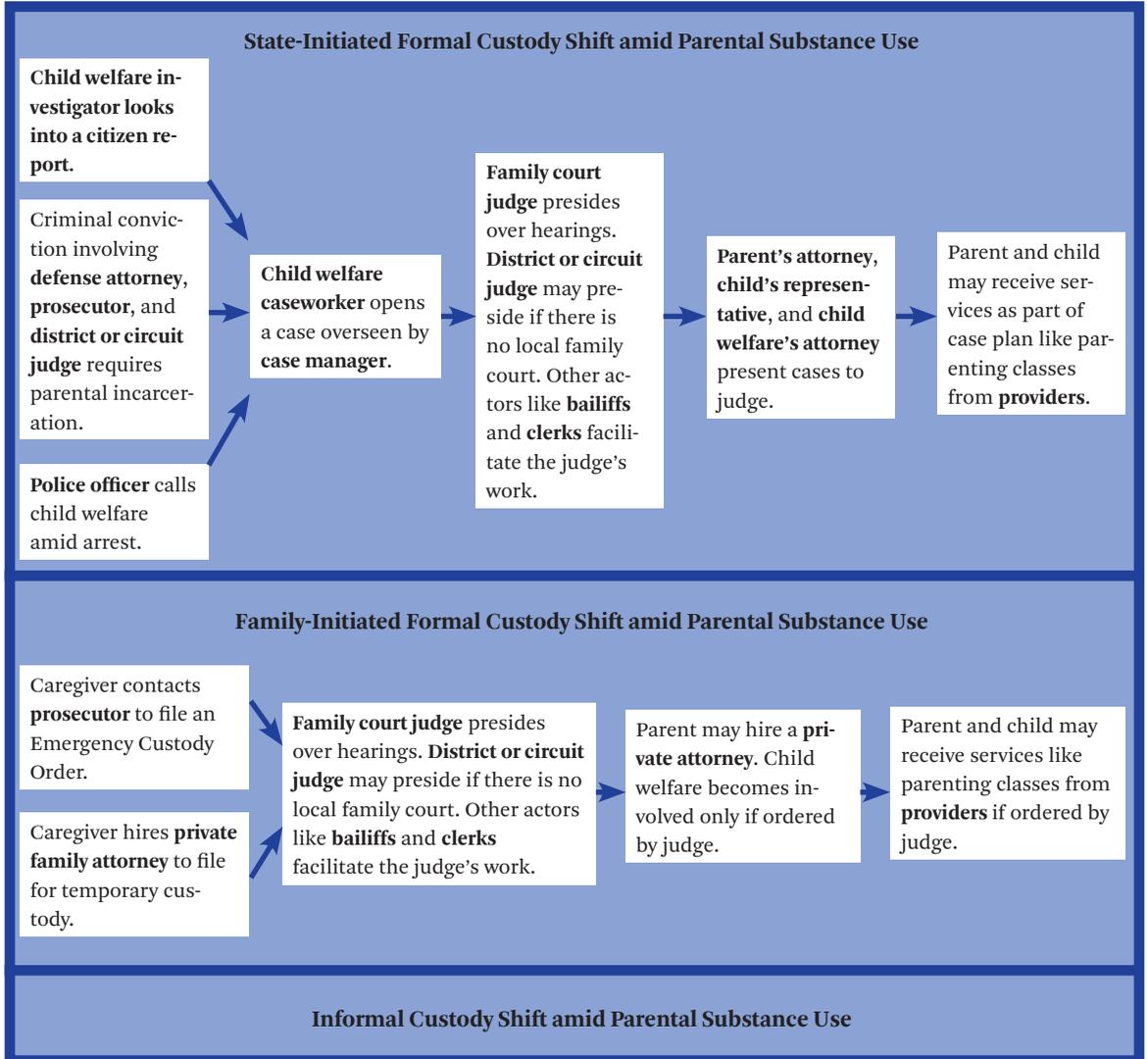
Across interviews, relative caregivers reported varying levels of stress and difficulty in their

initiation of kinship care. For some respondents, the process of kinship family formation was relatively smooth and involved little to no state intrusion. Although these respondents were navigating difficult familial challenges, they were able to secure legal arrangements that best suited their needs while avoiding unwanted surveillance. For other respondents, however, the process of kinship family formation was marked by fear, aggravation, and uncertainty. These respondents felt unable to secure a legal arrangement that met their financial needs and desire for stability, and they were overwhelmed by state surveillance and the threat of punishment.

Legal processes can be expensive, and certainly income impacts relatives' abilities to navigate kinship family formation. Relative caregivers face a trade-off between financial support and autonomy (Roberts 2001; Pittman 2015): whereas lower-income caregivers may feel coerced to trade autonomy for support, higher-income caregivers may be able to maintain autonomy without facing significant hardships. For families seeking to minimize state involvement, higher incomes also enable relatives to seek custody with a private attorney. However, even among families with similar economic capital, respondents experienced different levels of agency and comfortability in this process due to their direct and indirect connections with the local legal actors involved in kinship family formation. Figure 1 illustrates the process of kinship family formation when initiated by the state and when initiated by the family. Those local legal actors who execute and regulate this process are in bold, including such figures as child welfare caseworkers, judges, and prosecutors.

These legal actors themselves explained how they often know the parties in their work and the impact this can have on outcomes. When I met Allan, he was working as a public defender in a small rural county. Most of his caseload was drug related, and many of his clients were parents whose children were in kinship care. Regarding the nature of rural legal work, Allan said, “The first thing that you will

5. I also used other deductive primary codes, and added new primary codes inductively as I read. These, however, are not relevant here.

**Figure 1.** Legal Actors Involved in Kinship Family Formation

Source: Author's interviews with legal actors.

Note: Different actors are relevant if the process is initiated by the state or by the family. No actors are involved for an informal custody shift.

find in smaller counties is that they want to know who your people are . . . That's the first thing they try to figure out about everybody. They'll try to explain relationships based on how the networks interact. These people are the Smiths, and they've always been trash. That's common."

Allan contrasted the local legal system in the rural county where he was currently working with the legal system where he used to work in

a nearby medium-sized metropolitan area. Although this county is also in Central Appalachia and was also strongly affected by the opioid crisis, Allan found that social ties between legal actors and clients were not nearly as common: "There, no one remembers who your parents were. They don't remember your grandparents. The prosecutor doesn't know. A lot of times Social Services gets turned over enough that they don't really know either. But here, ev-

erybody knows. If your grandmother is a kook, or if she was in trouble the whole time your parents were younger, they're gonna know that. So yeah, there's a problem there. Especially in smaller counties, people will get remembered." Allan's clients were all low income, but he felt that clients' negative reputations and social ties could exacerbate the legal detriments they faced.

Judge Hansen echoed Allan, but she explained that though negative ties could serve as a detriment, positive ties could serve as a benefit. Speaking about rural legal systems, she said, "I think the biggest perk is everybody knows everybody, but the downfall is everybody knows everybody. It swings both ways." Thinking back to her work as a defense attorney, she recalled,

I was like, "My clients aren't calling me. Why am I here because they go directly to the county attorney?" Course it took me a while to figure out the county attorney wasn't gonna mess them over 'cause he knew them all . . . But then it swings the other way, when you walk in a court with your local person that's always in trouble, the judge knows that, the prosecutors, the police, everybody knows that, whereas if you're in a bigger city they may not know the backstory behind your client. But again that swings the other way in, yeah, they know the backstory, but they know their mom, they know their grandma, and they want to try to maybe help them a little bit more because it's not just a face; it's a person where they know the family.

Judge Hansen had recently begun her judicial position, and her hope was to ignore the "chatter" and make decisions based simply on legal facts. However, she recognized that in small towns, it is difficult to not know and be influenced by legal parties' backstories.

Although Allan and Judge Hansen were specifically speaking about criminal court, local legal actors also discussed how social ties could impact evaluations of potential relative caregivers in family law matters. Dave, a county attorney, often sees child abuse and neglect cases in his role, as relatives can approach the county

attorney's office to file for emergency custody. He expressed a concern that I heard from many legal actors: that relatives may not necessarily be the best caregivers for children, especially if they had "failed" raising the biological parents in question. However, Dave explained "exceptions" to this rule. He might know some relatives personally and feel certain that they would be good parents, yet eye others, about whom he had heard negative things, with greater skepticism.

D: The difficult part of that is you've got grandparents, you've got parents, you've got children. The parents are both drug addicts. Sometimes it's hard to give custody to the grandparents because you know, in the back of your mind, they raised these people, and look how they turned out—not good. Do we really want to send the grandchildren into that situation? And there are exceptions. There are exceptions where I know the grandparents, and they worked very hard. They tried to do as much as they could, and the kids, just for whatever reason, they got hooked on drugs. . . .

K: But how do you figure out who's who? Who's gonna be bad and who's the exception?

D: That's the good thing about being from here. Because even if I don't know, I know someone that does. I know someone that lives up the road. I know someone that goes to the church where these people go to church. Something where I can get a little more background than what you can get from reading the paperwork.

Dave's goal was to do what was best for the child, and he believed that knowing things about the relatives—whether good or bad—could help him make an informed decision. Consequently, a positive social tie with Dave may help a caregiver's case, while a negative tie may hurt it.

Outside the courtroom, social ties between parents, relatives, and actors in the child welfare system were also common. Brenda, a case manager for one county's child welfare office, explained that caseworkers typically either

know a family personally or know of the family because of past work with them or their extended relatives:

We kind of reached the generation where a lot of relatives had more than one set of relative placements. For example, I placed two children with a great aunt last year, and then her other niece had a baby, and she ended up with placement of that baby as well. We have reached the generational gap where people are raising different sets of children. . . . Here, even though it's a large county [area-wise], it's relatively small [population-wise]. Here in our county, people know each other, and a lot of times if we worked with the family before, we know who their families are.

Negative impressions of a family in general could lead caseworkers to view a parent or relative in that family with enhanced skepticism. Yet Andrea, an instructor who works with parents needing classes for child welfare case plans, noted that connections to child welfare caseworkers could also help families avoid child welfare involvement: "In this area too, a lot of people are kin to each other, and [there are] some people who get really good at hiding the things that they do, and that's a big problem with ours, is where they don't come out of the holler, and they don't tell everybody's business, and if they do find Social Services on their doorstep, if they're kin to someone who knows someone at the courthouse, then that kind of disappears. It's the culture here. They're gonna cover their family and hope that they're gonna fix their own problem." As Brenda and Andrea explained, legal actors' connections to parents and relative caregivers could influence how families were viewed and treated by the child welfare system.

That local legal actors are both connected to families and influenced by these connections has important implications for relative caregivers' navigation of kinship family formation. When relative caregivers possess social ties to these actors, the social capital derived from the ties may facilitate or impede their navigation of this process. Relative caregivers with positive connections to local legal actors

can draw on positive social capital to secure their ideal legal arrangement and minimize intrusive surveillance. Conversely, relative caregivers with negative connections may not have the agency to pursue their desired legal arrangement or may attract unwanted and degrading child welfare investigations. This social capital is inherently localized because legal actors only hold power within their places of work. However, relative caregivers' cases may take place outside their communities—for example, if the parent lives elsewhere or if they must travel for services. When relative caregivers must travel to a city or a rural county where they lack connections, they may face new uncertainties without the ability to draw on the social capital with the local legal actors they know.

### **The Benefits of Holding Positive Social Capital with Local Legal Actors**

When I met Barbara, she and her husband were caring for three of their four grandchildren. By that time, the children's mother, Ashley, had suffered from OUD for nearly twenty years, serving multiple sentences in both the county jail and state prison. Barbara comes from a "good" family that has lived in the county for generations. She is a faithful member of her Baptist church, worked a respectable job in the school system for years, and is active in the community. Through her family, her church, and her work, she has accrued several connections to the local legal actors who regulate kinship family formation.

When Ashley, then a young single mother, was first arrested, Barbara knew to draw on the social capital inherent in these connections to secure Ashley's baby. As Barbara recalled,

I got a call that she'd been arrested for something, I can't remember exactly what it was for, so I said, "OK, we gotta get to that baby." I worked for the schools, so I made a call—"I need a favor." You know how that works. This person did me a favor, and he went through the court system and got the baby in our name, thank God. We had her in our name so they [the state and the baby's other grandparents] couldn't take her. Well my Amber [Bar-

bara's other daughter], she worked in the county next door for the state welfare department, so she was kind of telling us every move we had to make to make sure no one could get to the baby.

Barbara called this process “going through the back door.” She knew she wanted to obtain temporary custody of her granddaughter before the child welfare system could get involved and before the baby's father's parents could step in. Temporary custody would provide her the peace of mind that her granddaughter was stable with her until Ashley was in recovery. And, as Barbara learned from Amber, this legal arrangement would also qualify her for a financial support program. In addition to “going through the back door” for child custody, Barbara also described “pulling strings” to help Ashley too—helping Ashley get probation or a diverted sentence to enter treatment programs rather than sit in jail.

Barbara eventually gained temporary custody of Ashley's next two children, again circumventing the child welfare system and going straight to her contacts at the court. Over time, Barbara came to realize how essential it was that she had circumnavigated child welfare involvement. She detailed an incident that she believed could have turned into the removal of her grandchild from her care if the child welfare system had been involved in her cases. While Ashley was living with Barbara, Ashley took one of the grandchildren to another person's house, and the child watched Ashley and her friends use heroin. From her interactions with other relative caregivers, Barbara knew this was grounds for child removal for relatives who had open cases with the child welfare system. Luckily, however, Barbara had avoided such extended state surveillance. As she said, they were safe “because we never did actually go through the state. We went through the court system in the back door.” After the incident, Barbara never again left the children alone with their mother.

Technically, Ashley's parental rights have not been terminated because Barbara and her husband only hold custody and have not adopted the grandchildren. Ashley could attempt to win custody back. At this point—seventeen

years into their caregiving roles—Barbara and her husband would be happy to adopt their grandchildren. However, adoption is costly, and they are not able to afford it. The uncertainty of legal custody was a huge burden on some relative caregivers' minds, particularly those who feared that the parents could convince a judge to give custody back to them. This, however, was not a stressor for Barbara. Barbara felt strongly that if her daughter were to take her case to the local court system, the system would stand behind Barbara and her husband. She told me, “Matthew Campbell's the county attorney, and he swears that she can't come and get them, because they've been in our life for so long. I firmly believe that all the judges would—not a one of them would go against us. They're not going to . . . Because everybody in town knows us. And everybody knows Ashley.”

Barbara and her husband have been facing significant financial struggles. Caring for three grandchildren, their Social Security retirement income is pushed to the max. Now saddled with new medical expenses, their financial struggles have only intensified, and they have accrued significant credit card debt. But what Barbara has lacked in economic capital, she has made up for in social capital. By drawing on her connections with local legal actors, Barbara could select a legal arrangement that would ensure both short-term and long-term stability for her family.

Barbara stepped into a caregiving role on her own accord, but other relatives might not have been able to do so. In the event of an arrest or child welfare investigation, for example, a relative caregiver may either take custody or be a foster parent, but their range of potential legal arrangements is limited. Nevertheless, relatives could still draw on their social capital to secure their positions as caregivers or minimize intrusion by the state. Joyce, for example, called the state police herself when her two grandchildren, age two and three—at the time, went missing from her daughter's home. After this incident, she planned to file for custody of the children on her own accord, but she realized that the state police were required to call Child Protective Services (CPS) to start an investigation. As a result, she was subject to ad-

ditional rules and procedures that would not have been in place had she avoided state involvement. She told me,

The social worker was asking things of us, and we're pretty level-headed people. We've got our game on. We just got these kids. It was like they were guiding us like sheep, and she told me, "You're gonna have to do this and this and this." I said, "Listen, I'll care for him and her, know we're giving them the best to their well-being possible. You've come in our home, you know what we are"—she actually knew my husband—but she was telling me I need to do this, and I need to do that. . . . She backed off.

Knowing their social worker personally, Joyce and her husband felt emboldened to stand up for themselves and minimize intrusion into their personal lives. Although they were not able to file custody independently and completely circumvent the child welfare system, they were still able to use their social capital to minimize state involvement.

Joyce and her husband still had to go to court every month, as the case workers updated the judge on their daughter's progress. At their permanency hearing, roughly a year after the children were removed, the judge was going to continue the hearing to the next month. Aggravated, Joyce decided to stand up and present her own case. As she recalled,

They don't want you to address the judge yourself, you're not allowed to talk, but finally I just stood up. I knew the judge, so finally I just stood up, and I said, "Can I say something here?" And he said, "What do you got to say?" And I said, "One, this is costing me a fortune. I had to take off work, shut down my business every month to come in here, and we're not going nowhere." They just wanted to continue it again, and I said, "Can we just finish it today?" I told them, "Drug test them." And finally he looked at them and said, "Can you all pass a drug test today?" He said, "If you can't, and you tell me you can, it's automatic ninety days' contempt of court," and they both said no they couldn't. He was gonna give them back that day. That was their day to

get them back, and they were gonna continue it because of something, and we're like, "Hey this is it, enough's enough."

Although the case was going to be continued, by standing up and speaking her mind, Joyce actually redirected the course of the hearing and was granted permanent legal custody. I had heard from others—including a foster parent—that this judge was typically short with parties, either not allowing them to talk in court or not listening to what they had to say. Yet Joyce's positive connection with the judge not only emboldened her to advocate for herself, but it also seemed to encourage the judge to listen to her. Ultimately, Joyce's social capital not only enabled her to minimize her case worker's involvement in their family life; it also helped her to secure permanent placement of her grandchildren.

### **The Detriments of Holding Negative Social Capital with Local Legal Actors**

Not only did Barbara and Joyce know a number of local legal actors like prosecutors and judges, but these legal actors also saw Barbara and Joyce in a favorable light. The two could draw on the positive social capital inherent in these connections as they navigated kinship family formation. Although Barbara initiated this process on her own, and the state initiated Joyce's, both women achieved their ideal legal arrangement—gaining custody—and managed to avoid unwanted and invasive surveillance by the child welfare system.

However, the social capital inherent in connections to local legal actors is not always positive. For caregivers who have antagonistic connections with legal actors, whether directly or indirectly, social capital derived from the connections may be negative. In this case, caregivers may feel unable to take action in the kinship family formation process, choosing to avoid these legal actors at all costs. Although a caregiver would not approach a legal actor with whom they hold negative capital, as someone with positive capital would, these interactions may still be unavoidable. For example, a relative caregiver may have to interact with these legal actors at the time of a parent's arrest, at the time of child removal, or during an open

child welfare case. Therefore, negative social capital could also welcome increased surveillance and threats of punishment for the caregiver.

When I met Roxanne, she was caring for four relative children—a grandniece and three grandnephews. Roxanne's income was similar to Barbara's, the first grandmother I introduced; she works part time, and her husband receives Social Security Disability insurance. But Roxanne's reputation and social connections looked very different. When I asked Roxanne how her county supports parents and families navigating OUD, she responded, "I can't speak for other counties, but in this county—I don't know how to say this—if you don't have the name or if you're not in a clique, you're trash, no more than a fly. They don't care what happens to you. The court, the law enforcement, the social workers, the teachers. Nobody."

Like Barbara, Roxanne's family had also lived in her county for decades, but her people were considered "bad." Although Roxanne herself did not have many negative connections with people in her community, her family's negative connections spilled over so that she too was seen in an unfavorable light. Recognizing the importance of one's networks, Roxanne took a new job at a local institution to try to forge positive connections. Although she felt that some people were starting to recognize her and trust her, she could not overcome the more entrenched negative perceptions about her family.

Roxanne felt that her negative social capital with local legal actors—particularly with law enforcement and the child welfare system—had made her caregiving experience significantly more difficult. For example, Roxanne was subject to an especially extreme level of CPS surveillance, enduring multiple unsubstantiated investigations in only a short period. She believed this harassment was a result of two factors. First, she had spoken out about her past difficulties with the local child welfare office, pointing to their lack of transparency and questioning whether they truly follow procedures as they are supposed to do. In gaining custody of her relative children, she had felt that the child welfare office had not adequately

communicated with her, connected her with resources, or respected her. She believed that word of her complaints had gotten back to them and that they were now taking it out on her. Shortly after she had spoken out, Roxanne recalled,

Social workers up here start harassing me, calling me saying, "Well, we've got a report of abuse. Austin has a knot on his head. You need to take him to the ER and have him completely checked." So I take him over there and get him completely checked out. He's fine, no knot on his head nothing. . . . So then we go along, and I get a letter in the mail saying "Your case has closed. We found the report unsubstantiated. . . ." Couple months later, they come back. I think it was the social worker was angry—the one that I reported—so she sends them out. Jesse's got a bruise on his arm. How'd he get this bruise on his arm? So he told them he had a bicycle wreck. "OK, well we gotta keep the case open. . . ." A couple of months after that case was closed, they go to school to talk to my kids because Jesse has a cut on his arm where he had broken my window out of the back door—he elbowed the back window because he was mad. . . . So they pull all of my kids out of class, and this is like the third time they've been to school, taking my kids out of class, ostracizing them in front of all the staff. And you know the teachers know that those are social workers. So that makes the kids feel bad. . . . Last Friday I get a letter in the mail saying they want me to take Jesse to the next county over to have him evaluated for sexual abuse. By that time I'd had enough. . . . I'm tired of her harassing me. The only reason she's doing this is because I reported her for not doing her job.

Roxanne had never endured such a high level of surveillance until she spoke out against this caseworker, initiating a negative tie. Roxanne went from interacting very rarely with the child welfare office to enduring what felt like near constant open investigations for an entire year.

In addition, another child welfare employee knew Roxanne's niece (Jesse's mother), and Roxanne felt that this employee was waging a

personal vendetta against her. She believed that this employee encouraged the constant investigations, searching for something that would allow her to punish Roxanne and her family. She continued, “I heard Kasey [the employee] with my own ears telling the police officer how she could not stand my niece, she hated her guts, and she was gonna take her child one way or another. I heard her say that with my own ears. Yes, she is vindictive.”

Roxanne felt so beaten down and discouraged that she decided she could not continue—both for her sake and for the children’s. She did not believe that she had the social capital needed to make this harassment stop and achieve stability for her family. Her last resort—her only claim to agency—was to relinquish her caregiving role. Although she had legal custody of the four children, she planned to informally relocate three of them to live with other relatives. She told me, “They harassed me so much I just said it’s not worth it. And I told them, I said, ‘You know I’ve tried and tried and tried to help these kids, and you all will not let me do it. So I’m done, I can’t do it anymore.’”

Roxanne had initially been awarded legal custody of her grandniece and grandnephews by the state, their parents having suggested her as a relative placement at the time of child removal. Doris similarly came to be the primary caregiver for her great-niece, although the state had not been involved. When Doris’s niece had to flee the state due to a warrant, she left her daughter, Becca, with Doris and signed a note to give Doris educational and medical rights.

Unlike Barbara and Joyce, Doris did not think that she had the agency to pursue her ideal legal arrangement. As an informal caregiver, Doris had few avenues for financial support. She was facing considerable financial hardships, as she had recently battled cancer and was receiving only a meager Supplemental Security Income (SSI) check. Pursuing temporary custody would enable her to access other financial support programs, such as state-funded child support. Legal custody would also ensure that Becca’s father and other grandmother could not try to take Becca from her. Past visits had proven to Doris that neither would be an adequate caregiver, and she worried about what would happen should her

grandniece be in their care full time. Yet pursuing custody did not seem feasible and Doris feared that the process could open her up to lose Becca. Doris’s mother, whom she lives with, had gotten custody of Becca’s mother years back. She worried about the stigma that her family could face—child welfare workers would know that Doris’s mother raised Becca’s mother and “failed.” Doris could not ensure that they would give Doris and her mother a second chance. Unlike Barbara, she did not know for certain that she would be granted temporary custody if she filed for it in court. Doris explained,

We spoke to a lawyer, and she said hold off till Becca was about twelve, and then she can say who she wants to live with. McKayla [her niece] just left her. I’ve got a paper that McKayla signed that I can do all of her health stuff and all that stuff. Then McKayla came in and wrote a paper and had it notarized that she wanted me and mom to have her, but the lawyer said that wouldn’t hold up in court. If her dad comes in, she’s never been around him. We were trying to avoid that.

Doris felt stuck in this period of limbo. She did not want Becca’s other family to petition for custody, but at the same time, petitioning for custody herself could prompt the state to give Becca to the other family anyway. She was left waiting until Becca was old enough so that they could approach the court system with more certainty of their outcome.

As an alternative, a school employee had suggested that Doris cede custody of her grandniece to the state to try to become a relative foster parent, which provides monthly payments. Barbara, the grandmother with positive social capital, had tried to do this herself; although potentially ceding custody to the state was scary, she knew that her connections in the court system would ensure that the children would stay with her. Doris, however, refused to do so. Again, she worried that knowledge of her family’s situation—and the multigenerational pattern of addiction that resulted in both McKayla’s removal and then Becca’s abandonment—could prompt caseworkers to refuse to give Becca back to her. She told me, “I’d be

afraid to do that. I wouldn't want to put her through that. I mean that's crazy. And then the kid has to go through trauma. They [social workers] make you look like a bad parent, don't you think? I wouldn't trust them. I'd be scared to do it."

Unlike Barbara, Doris did not have the assurance that the child welfare system would grant her foster parent status. She not only lacked positive social capital to draw on, but also worried that her family's negative reputation could harm her outcomes.

### **The Uncertainty of Lacking Social Capital with Local Legal Actors**

Whereas Barbara and Joyce were able to secure stability for their grandchildren, Roxanne's and Doris's stories demonstrate the tumultuousness and lack of control experienced by families holding negative social capital with local legal actors. Doris felt stuck in a tenuous and uncertain legal arrangement, in which her grandniece's father could try to seek custody. She was fearful of pushing for a legal change, which could provide her greater stability and financial support, because she felt that the state could choose to take her grandniece from her on the basis of negative perceptions of her family's history. Without having positive connections, Doris did not feel confident that she would maintain custody, as Barbara and Joyce did. Roxanne believed that her negative connections had attracted incessant CPS investigations and a constant threat of punishment. The only agency she had was to ignore CPS's orders and give her children up.

The social capital that can benefit or harm caregivers is specific to place: it is derived from the connections one has to the specific legal actors who hold power in that local legal system. Even if a caregiver holds positive social capital in their own town, derived from their networks there, they could lack such capital if their case spanned to another rural county or a nearby city. In these situations, caregivers found themselves in a new position of uncertainty; despite having more agency within their home counties, they felt powerless in communities where they did not have it.

Like Barbara and Joyce, Phyllis had positive social capital in her community. Although it

was her husband's hometown rather than her own, she had lived there for years. She was also an active volunteer for numerous organizations, doing work that put her in frequent contact with local legal actors. In their own county, Phyllis and her husband had obtained legal custody of four grandchildren, whose mother, their daughter, struggled with OUD. But their son John had moved to his wife's hometown in another county in the region where Phyllis and her husband did not know anyone. John's wife's family had lived in this county for years and was deeply embedded in the community's social fabric. Phyllis witnessed this family leverage their positive social capital with local legal actors to gain custody of their grandson. She explained: "Wanda [John's mother-in-law]—being very vocal and strong willed—she thought that they could get one over on him [John], and they did. They got Social Services involved because the mother-in-law knows everyone and has family down there. Knew everyone at Social Services. . . . So, by the time we got halfway over to the court that day, my son under duress had signed off the rights to his child, because that's what the mother-in-law and Social Services told them to do." Phyllis had suspected that Wanda had initiated this process in the first place because she was seeking to use her grandson's SSI benefits for herself.

Phyllis called lawyers to help John, but each one told her they could not take the case for a conflict of interest; when she called the child welfare office, she felt that she was blown off. She believed that she would never win custody over a family who was well connected in a county where she was not. Consequently, Wanda has held all the power in dictating when Phyllis can see her grandson and when John can see his son. John has since divorced his wife and has collected evidence that could get his in-laws in trouble, potentially allowing him to get his son back. However, Phyllis and John doubted that they would have any success because they recognized that the in-laws' positive capital protected them. Phyllis told me, "John has bettered himself. Their daughter has gone off the deep end. . . . We have everything and anything we could get on this woman. He's kept all the text messages to where they won't

let him see his son. He knows her [Wanda's] history because she's a drug addict, and she sells her pills and buys pills. He's got everything on her. . . . But when you live in a county where you can get by with whatever you want to, how can you get them in trouble?" Without their own social capital in this county, Phyllis and John felt that they had no say in determining the living arrangement for the child.

Although lack of social capital prevented Phyllis from achieving her ideal legal arrangement for her grandson—either securing custody for herself or for John—Maureen learned how a lack of social capital could open her up to surveillance and potential punishment. When I met Maureen, she held legal custody of her two grandchildren, whose mother was serving a state sentence for a drug-related crime at the local county jail. Maureen struggled financially because she had been denied disability benefits and was fighting her case to access support. However, like Barbara, what Maureen lacked in economic capital, she made up for in social capital. Multiple times, Maureen took care to tell me about how she was connected in her community—she runs a parent support group and sits on a community agency board. This work has put her in contact with many local legal actors, such as the caseworkers in her local child welfare office. She believed these connections had helped her gain legal custody of her grandchildren, juxtaposing her own case with others: "The judge that I had, he was great, but I do know he was a case-by-case judge. It was who you are, who you know. I knew him. This town is who you know, it's small, it's who you know and who you are. I know people it's hurt. Some people it's hurt them not necessarily by who they were but who they were associated with, like family members. It does impact the decision, it really does, it's sad to say but that's how this town is."

However, Maureen's social capital extended only as far as her county. Her grandchild had recently had a specialty doctor's appointment in the city, more than a two-hour drive from their home. While she was there, the hospital called CPS. She did not typically have to worry about interactions with CPS, because in her own county her positive connections with caseworkers meant that the local child welfare of-

fice would never open an investigation on her. This incident initially terrified Maureen, but she recognized that she was lucky the case was transferred to her local child welfare office. She explained,

Social Services got called on me the other day. My daughter [biological granddaughter] had to go to a hospital in Louisville, and they called on me. . . . Over something stupid, and [the local] Social Services knows that it wasn't anything, because I'm on the community council, and Social Services sits on that board with us, and I know all of them. It would have probably been a lot worse, they probably would've removed the kids. . . . When I had to go to Social Services, and the supervisor come out and say, "I knew your name. Oh my God, it's you Maureen." And I was like, "Yeah it's me."

Although Maureen was still shaken and embarrassed by the case, she at least had peace of mind that her local office was now managing it. They had to see the investigation through, but Maureen felt more at ease knowing that the caseworkers would look out for her and make sure she kept her grandchildren. Like Phyllis, Maureen had learned how much more autonomy and how much less intrusion she experienced in her own county—where she had positive social capital—than in other places where she had no connections to local legal actors.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

A robust literature demonstrates the importance of social capital and social support networks in rural communities (Clark, Harper, and Weber 2022, this issue), specifically in rural Appalachia (Miller and Edin 2022). For example, social networks can act as a buffer for poor rural families navigating food insecurity (Bowen, Elliot, and Hardison-Moody 2022, this issue), they can bolster educational achievement for rural children (Drescher et al. 2022, this issue), and they can facilitate wealth accumulation for rural young people entering adulthood (Keister, Moody, and Wolff 2022). Social networks also affect rural families' navigation of kinship family formation because of the social capital inherent in relative caregivers' connections to lo-

cal legal actors. Although relative caregivers in urban areas may know the legal actors who regulate kinship family formation, the low population sizes of rural communities simply make it much more common that rural caregivers will be directly or indirectly connected to those specific actors in their local legal system.

Research has considered how urban relative caregivers select from a diverse array of legal arrangements when forming kinship families (Pittman 2014). Here, I show that such agency is not possessed equally among rural relative caregivers. Rural relative caregivers' connections with the local legal actors who regulate kinship family formation affect their willingness to formalize kinship family structures and their comfort in doing so. Those with positive connections are confident that they have agency in the legal process behind kinship family formation because they can draw on positive social capital to secure their ideal legal arrangements and minimize state intrusion in their lives. Conversely, those with negative connections may feel that these processes are biased against them because of the perceptions that legal actors hold of them. These caregivers may feel stuck in legal arrangements that leave them without financial support or stability, or they may have to endure additional surveillance and threats of punishment.

Economic capital typically facilitates access to legal services; yet economic capital does not promise positive social capital, and vice versa. Barbara, for example, struggled financially but held positive social capital with her county attorney and family court judge. Conversely, another grandmother not profiled in this article was financially well off but felt disempowered in the kinship family formation process because she had a personal beef with the case manager in her local child welfare office. Social capital with local legal actors may also modify how class matters for individuals in the legal system. In his recent work on criminal court, for example, Matthew Clair (2020) finds that lower-class defendants are more likely than middle-class defendants to speak up in the courtroom, leading to strained relations with one's lawyer and worse outcomes. Yet recall that Joyce—a middle-class grandmother—felt emboldened to speak to the judge in her child

custody case on the basis of her positive personal connection to him. Although he was known for ignoring citizen appeals, the judge listened to Joyce and closed her case in her favor.

As the opioid crisis ravages on, greater numbers of rural families are navigating kinship family formation. Recent research on this population points to the unique ways that the rural context affects kinship families' experiences. For example, Anna Hansen and colleagues (2020) find that relative caregivers' worries for children's and parents' well-being are heightened due to the high levels of substance use in their community. Although kinship care has become more normalized because it is so widespread, the continued increases in kinship care and substance use also create an overwhelming sense of hopelessness. Other research, however, suggests that religion and spirituality—which are particularly salient in rural contexts like Central Appalachia—can facilitate coping by providing peace, purpose, and perspective (Dunfee, Brown, and Schoenberg 2020). My findings complicate our understanding of rural kinship care by demonstrating how relative caregivers' experience varied levels of stability and surveillance through the kinship family formation process despite the same familial challenge. Families with positive social capital can insulate themselves from some of the uncertainty that comes with child custody shifts; families with negative capital cannot.

In addition to illuminating inequalities across rural caregivers' experiences, these findings point to ways that rural communities and organizations can better support kinship families. Families like Doris's, for example, are currently hiding in informal kinship care arrangements that exclude them from many formal financial support programs such as state-funded child support. One grandparent said that she was fearful of approaching the social welfare office to apply for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program even though she met the program's criteria, believing that she would out herself as an informal caregiver and open herself up to potential state intrusion. Although the state cannot track numbers of informal relative caregivers, one caregiver support group leader explained that the number of

families she knew in such arrangements was increasing. Considering the legal vulnerability of these families, their exclusion from some financial support programs, and their fear of approaching state support services, nonprofits, faith communities, and schools should focus on providing an informal social safety net for these families.

Finally, the importance of social capital with local legal actors is likely portable from kinship family formation to other legal contexts. For example, if we consider the outcomes of these children's parents, it is likely that those parents with positive social capital can secure less punitive consequences when facing a drug-related charge. In addition to shedding light on the impacts of the opioid crisis on families then, these findings contribute to our understanding of the unique ways that the law perpetuates inequality in rural places (Pruitt 2007; Pruitt and Showman 2014).

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