The opioid epidemic was declared a public health emergency in 2017. In 2017 there were six times as many overdose deaths involving opioids as in 1999 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2017). There has been growing concern on who raises the children of parents with substance abuse disorders, who may be incarcerated, in treatment programs, or otherwise unable to care for their children.

In 2016, 34 percent of children who entered the foster care system were removed from their homes due to parental substance abuse (US Department of Health and Human Services 2017). Many children who live with relatives are not in the foster system – there are 20 times more children living with relatives outside of the foster system than those living with relatives who are in the foster system (Generations United 2016).

The percentage of children living in a grandparents-headed household increased from 3 percent in 1970 to 6 percent in 2012 (Ellis and Simmons 2014). In 2016, there were 7.2 million grandparents living with their grandchildren, and over 2.5 million were responsible for their grandchildren’s basic needs (US Census Bureau 2017).

Research Question

Is the prescription opioid rate associated with the percentage of grandparents raising grandchildren? Do demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of the area affect any association found between the prescription opioid rate and grandparents raising grandchildren?

Data and Methods

Opioid Prescribing Rate: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2016

Data is made available by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (https://www.cdc.gov/drugoverdose/epidemic/index.html). These data are used to determine the opioid prescribing rate per 100 people for counties. The opioid prescription rate is per 100 persons and includes both new and refill prescriptions.

Grandparents Raising Grandchildren, Socioeconomic and Demographic Variables: 2012-2016 American Community Survey, 5-year estimates

The data come from the United States Department of Agriculture 2013 Rural-Urban Continuum Codes. The association between grandparents raising grandchildren and socioeconomic and demographic characteristics at the county level is analyzed.

Results

The relationship between the opioid prescribing rate and the percentage of adult raising grandchildren varies by geographic level of analysis and proximity of counties to a metropolitan area. At the state level, the opioid prescribing rate is positively associated with adults raising grandchildren, but this relationship is not significant at the county level. When counties are grouped into metropolitan and nonmetropolitan counties, this relationship is significant and positive for metropolitan counties, but not nonmetropolitan counties.

Prevent and the percent of adults that are female are both positively associated with adults raising grandchildren, while the median age is negatively associated with this. The associations of racial and ethnic groups follow previously established patterns of grandparents raising grandchildren by race/origin (Els and Simmons 2014).

Summary

At the state level, controlling for socioeconomic and demographic characteristics, the opioid prescription rate is positively associated with adults raising grandchildren. At the county level, controlling for the same socioeconomic and demographic characteristics, the opioid prescription rate is not significant, indicating that other factors may be at play.

It is possible that much of the percentage of adults raising grandchildren can be explained by poverty. Many of the states with the highest percentage of adults raising grandchildren also have the highest opioid prescribing rates.