ABSTRACT: This article explores the benefits of clarifying subsystem boundaries in grandfamilies, families in which grandparents are primary caregivers to their grandchildren. The author reviews what is known about grandfamilies, presents the theory and research behind the importance of clear subsystem boundaries, and argues that grandfamilies are particularly vulnerable to problematic subsystem boundaries. Case examples are used to demonstrate how clarifying subsystem boundaries with grandfamilies in family therapy can open up resources for improved family functioning.

KEY WORDS: grandparents; subsystem boundaries; family therapy.

Grandfamilies, families in which grandparents are primary caregivers to their grandchildren, are becoming increasingly common. According to United States census data, the number of children living with or without their parents in households headed by their grandparents increased 46% from 2,306,000 in 1980 to 3,368,000 in 1993, which currently comprises more than 5% of the children in the United States (Saluter, 1994). In one year, the number of these children living in grandparent-headed households without the presence of either parent jumped by 17% from 867,000 in 1992 to 1,017,000 in 1993 (Saluter, 1994). Since these numbers are only a formal count of what is often an informal arrangement, the real numbers may be much higher. Burton (1992) found that in two communities with high pro-
portions of single-parent, low-income households between 30% and 60% of African-American school-age children were being raised by their grandparents.

It stands to reason that family therapists will be and likely have been seeing more and more grandfamilies in their agencies and practices. Unfortunately, there is little in the family therapy literature to guide family therapists in their work with these complex families (Ehrle & Day, 1994).

In this paper, the author will argue that grandfamilies are particularly vulnerable to problems arising from blurred boundaries between subsystems. A case for the therapeutic utility of working to clarify subsystem boundaries in grandfamilies will be presented and illustrated with case examples. At the outset, the circumstances of grandfamilies and the concept of subsystems will be discussed in more detail, and a parallel with divorced and remarried families will be drawn.

WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT GRANDFAMILIES

Demographic Characteristics

The American Association of Retired Persons (AARP, 1994a) has analyzed unpublished data from the United States Census Bureau's March 1992 Population Survey to determine characteristics of grandparent who are rearing their grandchildren. They found that these grandparent householders are, on average, the poorest and least educated of all non-traditional householders. While grandfamilies exist at all economic levels, 56% have annual incomes of less than $20,000. More than half of these grandparent caregivers did not graduate from high school. It makes sense that grandfamilies are more prevalent at lower income and education levels; lower income and education mean fewer resources, which in turn leaves fewer alternatives to grandparent care when parents are not capable of caring for their children.

The AARP (1994a) also found that the median age of grandparents who are rearing their grandchildren without the help of either parent is 57 years of age, that more than half of these grandparent caregiver households live in the South, and that 76% of these grandparents are married. Of the remaining 24% who are single (never-married, widowed, or divorced), 93% are women (AARP, 1994a). This suggests that grandmothers are most often the primary