



MARYLAND

FAMILY POLICY IMPACT SEMINAR

The Need for Child Care Subsidies: Challenges Faced by Low income Families with Young Children in Care

Child care plays an important role in facilitating parental employment and child development. Unfortunately, for many low-income parents reliable, high-quality child care is unobtainable due to cost constraints. For others, the sacrifices made to afford such care are severe. This policy brief, based on a recent research study of suburban families, describes the child care choices and hardships endured while on a waiting list for a child care subsidy.

Study Participants

The 40 participants of this study were on a waiting list for a child care subsidy. They were primarily single mothers ranging in age from 20-45. All parents in the study had at least a high school education and the majority (51%) had at least some college. Most were employed and worked an average of 37.8 hours per week. A substantial minority worked nights (20%) and weekends (25%), and about 8% of parents had a frequently changing schedule. Their average income was \$28,000 and they had an average of two children.

Child Care Choices

Twenty percent of research participants used multiple providers for their youngest child; the use of multiple providers decreased with age. Families who used multiple arrangements predominately used centers/family care providers as the primary arrangements and relative/spouse/child self-care as the secondary or tertiary arrangements.

Primary Child Care Arrangement for Youngest Child (Percentage of Children in Arrangement)

Type of Care	Age Group		
	0-2 years	3-4 years	5-13 years
Center-based care	23%	50%	73%
Family day care provider	54%	38%	18%
Relative	15%	6%	9%
Spouse care	0%	6%	0%
Parent cares for child at work	8%	0%	0%

Use of Undesirable Care

About eighteen percent of parents reported using a child care provider they did not like in the last three months, 15% reported using an unreliable provider and 20% reported using care they categorized as “low-quality”. Sixty-three percent of parents reported a desire to change arrangements. Primary reasons for wanting to switch care were: desire for better learning opportunities (56%), higher quality arrangements (22%), and more convenient provider location/hours (22%).

Parental Perspectives

Parents were asked what they would tell policymakers about their experience on the child care waiting list. Responses were categorized into four themes: (1) the need for child care subsidies, (2) parents’ desire for high-quality care, (3) issues involving child care providers, and (4) the interplay between child care and employment.

The Need for Child Care Subsidies

“Some people’s day care is more than rent and it’s a necessity” –mother of two children aged 3 & 9

Eighteen percent of parents spent 50% of their income or more on child care. Parents reported enduring various sacrifices in order to place their children in acceptable child care arrangements. These sacrifices included having to change work hours, being late on rent and being unable to (1) pursue additional education for themselves, (2) get out of debt, and (3) afford things they wanted for themselves or their children.

Desire for High Quality Care

Parents placed a high emphasis on their children’s ability to learn, be safe, and well-cared for. Two parents claimed they would not be able to go to work if

they did not trust their child care provider. More dramatically, one parent of a three year old reported that she'd "rather be poor and homeless than put her [child] in a compromising situation."

Child Care Providers

"With grandmother and great-grandmother, I'm working around their schedule. They are sometimes unreliable, especially due to travel plans. I don't want to use relatives because if one of them gets mad at you, you're messed up and they don't want to come over."

– mother of three children aged 4, 7, & 10

Parents reported difficulty in finding affordable providers, especially for children under two and middle school-aged children. The importance of having convenient child care providers was also highlighted. Parents commented on: being forced to take vacation time during providers' vacations due to the lack of a back-up provider, the need for provider flexibility, the burden of pricy late pick-up fees and the need for conveniently located child care to facilitate parental employment. Finally, parents spoke about obligations to informal care providers, a fear of burdening such providers and the sometimes unreliable nature of informal providers.

Child Care and Employment

The match between child care and employment hours were a primary concern to parents. One preschooler's parent reported paying \$200-\$300 more than her normal child care expenses for weekend care. Another parent reported choosing to miss days at work because he was never able to leave work in time to avoid late child pick-up fees. Finally, one parent reported being regularly late to work because the child care center he used was not open when he had to leave for work. In response to a warning from his boss, he quit his job and found a job with different hours.

Suggestions for Policy and Programming

This study is unique due to its currency and examination of families who are eligible and currently on a wait list for child care subsidies. The findings contained corroborate those from studies conducted by the Urban Institute, National Women's Law Center, and other national research/advocacy organizations.

The current and aforementioned studies agree that many low-income parents are unable to afford reliable, high-quality child care. This inability has ramifications on parents' ability to maintain employment and on their children's well-being. The provision of child care subsidies assists parents in affording reliable, high-quality care. Thus, policymakers should maximize parents' ability to access child care subsidies by prioritizing this program in funding decisions.

Additional copies of this and other briefs available at:
<http://www.hhp.umd.edu/FMST/fis/MDresources.htm>

This policy brief created by:

Nikki Forry, Doctoral Candidate, Department of Family Studies, College of Health and Human Performance, University of Maryland, College Park.

Reviewed by:

Susan Walker, PhD,
Associate Professor, Department of Family Studies,
University of Maryland

Bonnie Braun, PhD & Elaine Anderson, PhD,
Directors of the Maryland Policy Impact Seminar
University of Maryland

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