



Minnesota Child Care Choices: Study and Sample Description

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OVERVIEW

Families with young children must make multiple decisions about early care and education that will play an important role in their children's health and development. Each family's unique circumstances influence the decisions they make and the degree to which child care arrangements meet families' needs. For example, families take into account their income, their work schedule, their values and preferences, the number and ages of different children in their household, and the availability of other family members who could help with child care, to name just a few key, intertwined influences on child care decisions. Depending on their community, families can consider different formal and informal settings for their children, including full-day child care centers, in-home child care offered by a licensed provider, in-home child care offered by a relative or friends, and early childhood programs (such as Head Start). With so many options and constraints, child care decision-making can be challenging for families, particularly if they are limited by their income or other barriers such as lack of transportation or lack of flexibility about work schedule. In contrast, factors such as access to subsidies or the availability of family members who can help with care can facilitate decision-making.

The purpose of the Minnesota Child Care Choices Study is to examine the child care decision-making process in families with low incomes, and to provide policymakers in Minnesota and the nation with insights into the resources and supports that are most effective in helping families navigate and access the full spectrum of early care and education options.

The Minnesota Child Care Choices Study was launched by researchers from Child Trends and the University of Minnesota, in collaboration with state child care administrators and staff at the Minnesota Department of Human Services and Wilder Research. The researchers received funding from the Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation (OPRE) in the Administration for Children and Families of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, to conduct the study from October 2007 through September 2011. Matching funds for the study were provided by the Minnesota Early Learning Foundation. The research team received additional funding from OPRE in October 2010, to augment the study through a Child Care Policy Research Partnership between Maryland and Minnesota. In addition to extending the study to include a third year of survey research in Minnesota, a comparable sample of families will be drawn in Maryland so that both within- and between-state comparisons can be made on the factors that are most critical in child care decision-making in families with low incomes. For more information and Research Briefs in this series, please visit www.mdmnresearchpartnership.com.

Over the past decade, the State of Minnesota has made significant investments to support child care research projects, including providing matching funds for the Minnesota Child Care Policy Research Partnership from 2000-2005, and funding a household survey of child care conducted every five years.¹ The results of these projects have informed the priorities set by the State's child care administrators regarding quality improvement strategies, family, friend and neighbor (FFN) care, professional development for the child care workforce, and subsidy policy. The Minnesota Child Care Choices Study continues this tradition of collaboration between researchers and state agency staff to address research questions of critical importance for vulnerable families in Minnesota.

This Research Brief is the first in a series, based on the results of the Minnesota Child Care Choices study, and designed to respond to the interests of state child care administrators, county agency staff and other early childhood stakeholders in Minnesota and the nation. Understanding the choices families make, and the resources they use to make their decisions about child care, is an important focus of the study. The research team will examine financial resources, such as child care subsidies, and information resources, such as those available through Minnesota's pilot Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) – a tool for helping parents learn about and select child care that is high-quality.

This first Brief provides an overview of the study's research questions and design, and describes the sample of families who participated in the baseline survey. Other Briefs in the series will summarize findings from the study on a number of important topics, such as:

Families' child care choices, their decision-making process, and their perceptions of quality

What decisions do low-income families make about the type and number of arrangements to use? What family characteristics influence these choices? How do families feel about the arrangements they are using?

Influences on families' use of child care subsidies

What factors influence families' decisions to use a child care subsidy? What types of settings are selected by parents using a subsidy? In what ways do eligible families who use subsidies differ from those eligible families who are not using subsidies?

The influence of child care subsidies on families' choice of child care arrangements

How do subsidies affect families' child care choices? Do families who use subsidies prefer and select different child care arrangements than families who don't use subsidies? Do parents perceive differences between the quality of subsidized and unsubsidized care arrangements? Does their use of subsidies result in child care arrangements that are more stable over time?

Families' awareness and use of QRIS

What resources (including QRIS) do parents use for learning about child care? What factors affect how aware families are of the QRIS, and their use of the QRIS information? What distinguishes families who are and are not using the QRIS information? What distinguishes families who are and are not using child care programs that are rated by the QRIS? What is the type and star-level of the QRIS-rated programs parents are using?

Influences on child care stability, reliability and employment outcomes

What family, community, and child care characteristics affect the stability and reliability of care, and parents' employment experiences outcomes? Is parents' satisfaction with their child care related to the frequency of child-care-related disruptions to their work schedule? To what extent do child care-related work disruptions affect job tenure, job advancement and wage increases?

Study Methods

The Minnesota Child Care Choices study uses two data sources to address the central research questions. First, a survey conducted by Wilder Research is used to gather information every five to six months from a sample of low-income parents who have at least one child age six or under, have applied to receive financial assistance

¹ For findings from the 2009 survey, see Chase, R. & Valorose, J. (2010). *Child Care Use in Minnesota: Report of the 2009 Statewide Household Child Care Survey*. Wilder Research: St. Paul, MN.

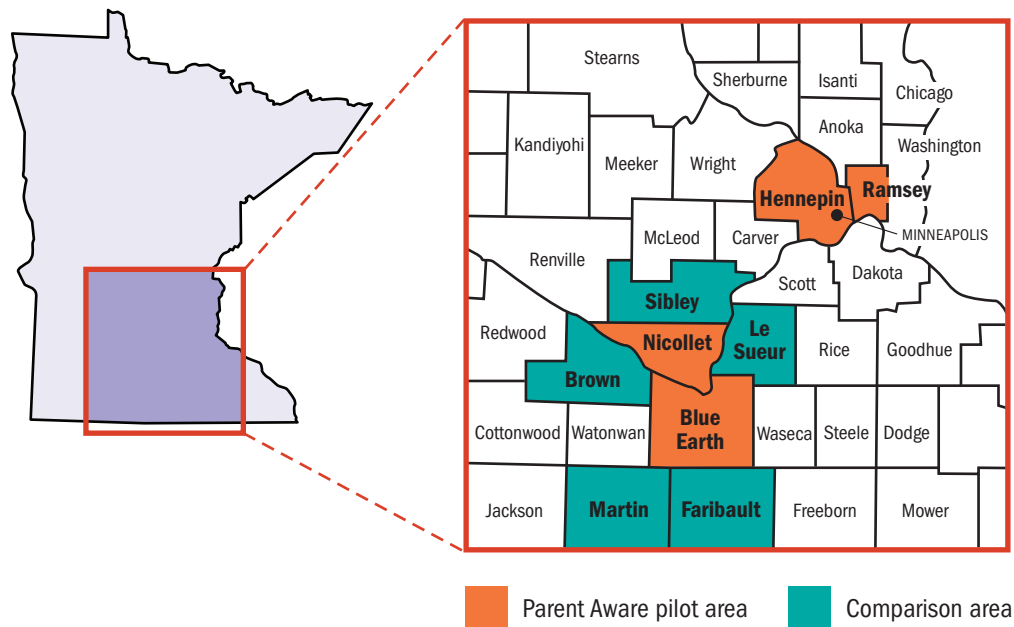
through Minnesota’s welfare or child care subsidy programs, and lived in a Parent Aware pilot area or a rural comparison area at baseline (August 2009-April 2010) (see Figure 1 for a listing of study counties).²

The survey includes questions on a variety of topics, including:

- families’ child care preferences and choices
- the factors that affect their child care choices
- the process they use to make child care decisions
- their awareness and use of Minnesota’s QRIS in selecting child care arrangements
- families’ perceptions of the quality of the child care they use
- child-care-related work disruptions
- parents’ employment
- household structure
- use of public assistance programs
- level of stress about parenting
- parents and children’s health status
- parents’ emotional well-being

Families meeting the eligibility criteria were recruited into the study at the time of application for services at their local county agency. The sample includes families with low incomes from rural and urban areas of Minnesota. In addition to the survey data, this study uses administrative data from the Minnesota child care subsidy program (Child Care Assistance Program [CCAP]) to track participants’ use of subsidies and the types of subsidized care arrangements used over time.

FIGURE 1: Counties included in the Minnesota Child Care Choices Study



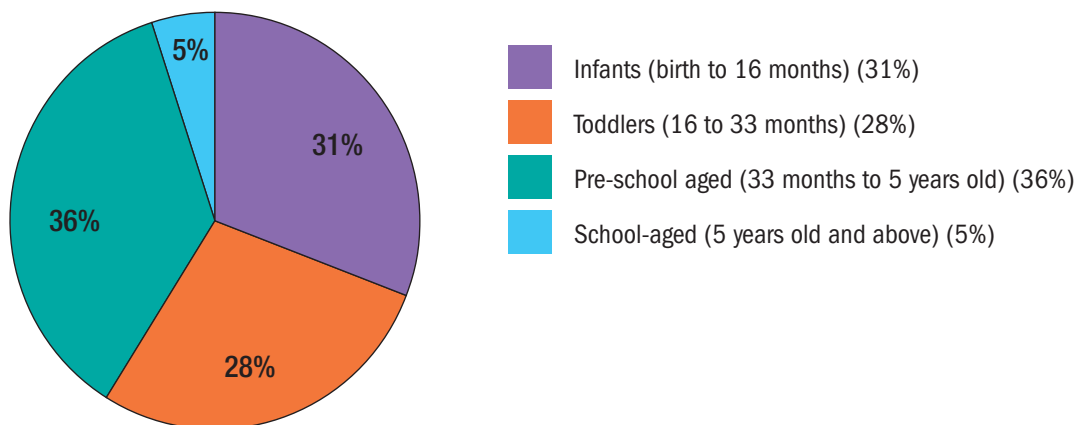
²Four of the 323 parents included in the baseline study lived in a Minnesota county outside of the study recruitment area. At the time of recruitment into the study, these parents were seeking welfare services in one of the study counties.

Sample Description

The sample for the longitudinal Minnesota Child Care Choices study consists of 323 parents. The majority of parents completing the baseline survey are mothers (90%). Two-parent and one-parent families were included in the study, regardless of cultural background or primary language. Parents were, on average, 25 years old. These parents had, on average, two children under the age of 18 at the time of initial contact (611 total children). From each family, one child, aged birth to five years, was randomly selected for the study. If there was no child under five but there was a six-year-old, parents could complete the survey using the six-year-old as the focal child. Throughout these Briefs, findings are based on questions about the focal child unless stated otherwise. Baseline interviews for this study were conducted between August 2009 and April 2010.

At the baseline interview, focal children in the sample ranged in age from less than one month to 6 years, and the median age was 28 months. Thirty-one percent (99 children) were infants ranging in age from birth to 16 months old, 28% (90 children) were toddlers, ranging in age from 16 to 33 months, and 36% (117 children) were pre-school age, ranging from 33 months to 5 years old, and not yet attending kindergarten. The remaining 5% (17 children) were ages five or six and attending either kindergarten or first grade (see Figure 2).

FIGURE 2: Age distribution of children in the sample



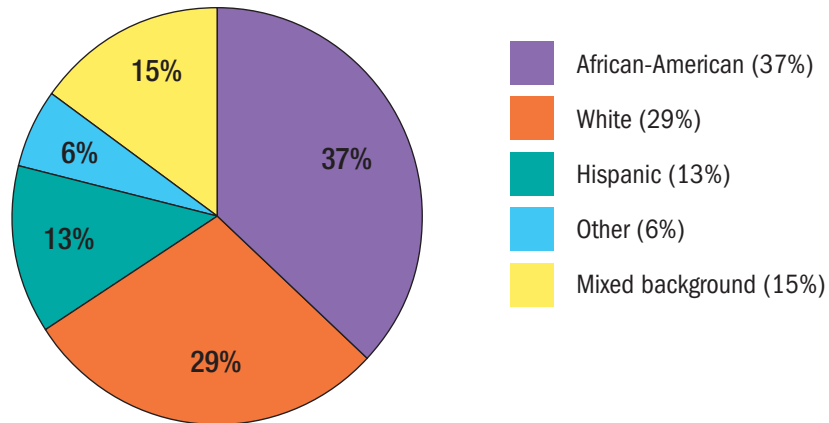
SOURCE: Minnesota Child Care Choices Wave 1 survey data

The majority of children were either non-Hispanic African-American (38%) or non-Hispanic white (29%). Thirteen percent of the sample was Hispanic, and 6% represented a single other race (half of this group was Hmong). Fifteen percent identified themselves as having a mixed ethnic background, and the majority of this group was African American and white. Other ethnicities represented include Korean, Vietnamese, Asian/Asian-Indian, Alaskan Native/Native Hawaiian, Mexican, Puerto Rican, Ethiopian, Somali, and Central American (see Figure 3).

Most of the children were rated by their parents as being in excellent or very good health (88%). Eight percent of children had participated in services for a disability or received specialized services, such as occupational or speech therapy, and 5% had health problems that limited their activities. Parents were also asked whether their child had any other conditions, such as behavioral problems, which might make it hard for them to find a child care arrangement. Approximately 2% of parents reported these conditions.

Of the 323 parents in the baseline sample, 318 chose to complete the phone interview in English, three chose to complete the interview in Somali, and two chose to complete the interview in Hmong. Though the fielding team was prepared to administer the survey in other languages (including Spanish, Hmong and Somali), alternate languages for survey administration were rarely requested by study participants. This is noteworthy, given that close to 10% of the sample reported being from an immigrant or refugee group, and 7% reported speaking a language other than English at home.

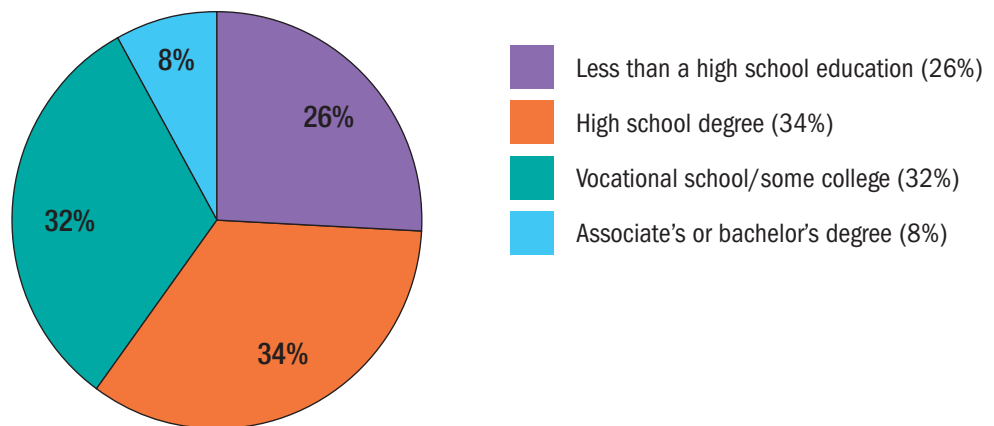
FIGURE 3: Race and ethnicity of children in the sample



SOURCE: Minnesota Child Care Choices Wave 1 survey data

Approximately one-third of parents in the sample had a high school degree only (34%). Significant proportions had less than a high school education (26%), or vocational school/some college (32%). A small proportion (8%) of the sample had an associate's or bachelor's degree (see Figure 4).

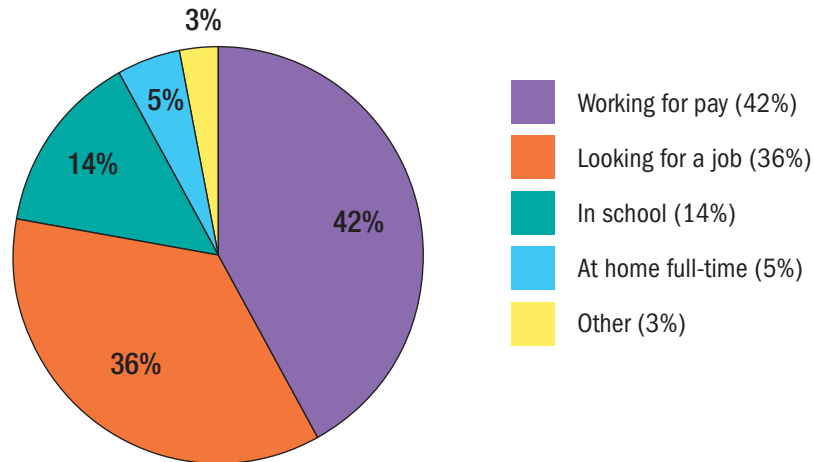
FIGURE 4: Education level of parents



SOURCE: Minnesota Child Care Choices Wave 1 survey data

The employment status of parents varied widely (see Figure 5). The majority was either working for pay (42%) or looking for a job (36%). Fourteen percent were in school, and half of those in school were also looking for a job. Five percent of parents were at home full-time. The remaining 3% of parents were either receiving disability benefits or participating in an unpaid job training program.

FIGURE 5: Employment status of parents



SOURCE: Minnesota Child Care Choices Wave 1 survey data

The annual median household income for survey participants in 2008 was \$14,000.

At baseline, the survey participants reported currently receiving a number of social services. Close to three-quarters of families (71%) had someone in their household receiving welfare or MFIP. The majority of parents reported that someone in their household received Medicaid/Medicare (63%), food stamps (89%), or WIC (71%). Other social services used by parents or their family members included CCAP (44%), free or reduced-price school meals (35%), Section 8 housing vouchers (21%), and unemployment insurance (6%). Less than one percent of the sample reported receiving disability insurance for her/himself, and 7% reported that someone in his/her household received disability insurance.

Summary of the Minnesota Child Care Choices Study Sample

The families participating in the Minnesota Child Care Choices study will provide important information about how families who have low incomes and young children select child care, and the resources and supports that are most helpful for them in finding and accessing high-quality options. The majority of families have at least one child under the age of three, and are either working, looking for work or in school. Over half of the sample has a high school degree or less as their highest level of educational attainment. The median income for the sample in the year prior to the baseline interview was \$14,000.

Implications and Next Steps

The findings of the Minnesota Child Care Choices Study will provide timely and useful information to stakeholders and decision makers across Minnesota and the nation. Specifically, this study will:

- Describe which eligible families choose to take up financial assistance for child care. State child care administrators can use the information to understand more about the families that are served, and how families perceive different types of financial assistance.
- Illustrate how low-income parents' child care choices—including the type and quality of care—are related to the stability of care and, in turn, to parents' employment and family outcomes. This information can guide discussion among child care subsidy administrators, policymakers, and practitioners about how to develop child care policies and practices that can best meet the needs of low-income families.

- Provide early evidence about whether and how families with low incomes use information from a pilot Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) in their decisions about child care. This information can be used to refine the Minnesota pilot QRIS and inform planning for the possibility of statewide implementation. It can also inform the development and structure of QRIS in other states.
- Describe whether and how parents' choice of child care changes when they have access to both a subsidy and quality information from the QRIS. Such information can help CCDF administrators make decisions about where to invest quality improvement funds and which types of care to target.

Finally, the findings from Minnesota Child Care Choices Study will complement findings from the 2009 Statewide Household Child Care Survey. According to that survey, Minnesota families with low incomes report having fewer child care choices and more child care challenges and problems than do families with higher incomes. They spend 20% of their income on child care, compared to the 9% families with higher incomes spend on child care. When families receive child care subsidies they use child care centers at a higher rate than other families, and rate the quality of their child care arrangements higher than do families with low incomes who don't use child care subsidies. The Minnesota Child Care Choices Study will extend the findings of the 2009 Statewide Household Child Care Survey by focusing exclusively on families with low incomes, by using a longitudinal design, and by using administrative records to understand patterns of child care choices, subsidy use, and stability of child care arrangements over time. The study will provide in-depth information about how families access child care subsidies and the process by which they choose (and change) their child care arrangements.