

Falling Through the Cracks: Child Care Decision Making Among the Working Poor

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Project Description.

The purpose of this project was to understand how different factors influence working poor parent's decision making and perceptions regarding their child care arrangements. Parents in a central Missouri community completed a survey which allowed them to assess their work flexibility, affordability concerns, experiences with child care subsidy and other types of child care financial assistance, caregiver flexibility, social support, and transportation barriers. These factors served as independent variables for the study. The survey also measured parental satisfaction, continuity of child care and how important quality and logistical concerns were in ideal and real child care decision making.

Families in Missouri face one of the lowest subsidy eligibility cutoff points (127% of the federal poverty level [FPL]). Very few eligible families receive subsidies. Yet there has been an excess of funding in the subsidy system. Missouri stakeholders expressed a need to understand better why working poor parents choose certain types of child care and how they feel about the arrangements they obtain. Although much research has identified micro-level variables such as parent education and demographic characteristics that influence choice, less is known about how the broader context of family life shape parental decision-making and perceptions about child care.

Research questions. How do meso- and macro-level context conditions influence working poor parents:

- Child care selection criteria
- Satisfaction with child care
- Continuity of child care

Sample. This sample was collected in one central Missouri county over the course of three months at

three separate locations: the Women, Infant and Children program, the public library, and Head Start. The objective was to obtain a sample of working poor parents across the low-income spectrum (up to 300% FPL) with different types of child care and subsidy receipt status. The sample includes 154 parents who use non-parental child care at least 10 hours per week. The average FPL for households in the sample was 112%. Forty-five percent of parents received some type of financial assistance with child care, mostly through child care subsidies, although 67% of the entire sample was income eligible. Several types of child care were reported for the primary non-parental arrangement, however the most common were center based care (25%), relative care (23%), preschool (17%), and a licensed home provider (12%). The average age of the youngest child in care was two years old.

Methods. The survey was developed with items from the researcher, two previous surveys (Emlen et al., 1999; Raikes, 2005) and a guide to developing parental child care surveys (Emlen & Weber, 2007). After obtaining Institutional Review Board approval and pilot testing, the instrument was distributed face-to-face by the researcher using purposive and convenience sampling and each participant received a \$10 gift card for completing the survey. Each of the three sites selected for the sample signed a permission letter to allow the researcher to collect data.

Once data were collected, surveys were coded and entered into SPSS 18.0. Three binary logistic regression models were used to assess the relationship between the independent (meso- and macro-level conditions) and dependent (selection, satisfaction and continuity) variables. Descriptive information was also obtained regarding parental assessment of subsidy experiences.

Progress Update.

This Child Care Research Scholar project has completed all stages except data dissemination. Results will be presented at the National Research Conference on Child and Family Programs and Policy in July 2011. A policy and practice brief are currently being drafted and will be available on the website of the Center for Family Policy and Research. A draft to submit for publication in a peer-reviewed journal is currently in progress.

Key findings. Parents with greater barriers were significantly more likely to report a discrepancy in the importance of quality/logistics between an ideal and actual child care choice. However further tests (Wald criterion) revealed that low social support and lack of financial assistance were most influential in this model.

Parents with greater barriers were more likely to report some level of dissatisfaction with their child care arrangements. The Wald criterion identified lack of financial assistance, low work flexibility and difficulty with affordability of care as most influential in this model.

Parents with greater barriers were more likely to report some level of discontinuity of child care. The Wald criterion revealed that low social support was most influential in this model.

Overall parents who received child care subsidies provided positive feedback about their experiences. However fewer parents than were eligible actually received subsidies and parents reported not knowing how to apply as the number one reason for not receiving subsidies. For parents who had ever received subsidies in their lifetime, common barriers to finding care were difficulty keeping subsidies, interruption of subsidy use, and limited choices of providers.

Implications for policy/practice

Families who received financial assistance with the cost of child care were able to choose child care based more on quality, and felt more satisfied with their child care choices. This finding brings to light the need to work harder to ensure that more eligible families receive financial assistance with child care,

either through subsidies, Head Start, or other means. In addition, the fact that the sample in this study contained many participants that were possibly eligible for assistance but who did not receive it, reinforces the aforementioned point. Information dissemination to families about how to apply for subsidies needs to improve. Easing recertification requirements may also address issues of parents not knowing how to receive subsidies or being able to maintain continuous subsidy use.

Social support (measured in this study by the availability of friends and family to help with child care and backup care) also needs more attention in policy and practice given its emergence as important in both decision-making and maintaining continuous care.

Implications for research

Two measures developed for this research warrant further study. First, the social support scale focused on whether parents had help with care from family and friends and a back up system of care when needed. Further research should work to refine and develop a measure for this type of support, given its emergence as significant in two of three models.

In addition, the selection criteria dependent variable was calculated as a discrepancy score in the importance of both quality and logistical characteristics of child care between parents' actual choice and an ideal choice. Further research should take into account both assessments to better understand the sacrifices parents make when choosing care.

For more information:

This research will be available as a dissertation at the University of Missouri and on the Research Connections website.

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