

Evaluation of Child Care Voucher Eligibility Reassessment Administrative Changes in Massachusetts

Project Team:

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Grant Number: 90YE0150-01-00

Period of Funding: September 2013 - October 2017

Project Description.

Many families receive child care subsidies for short spells and often cycle on and off the program. To address persistent subsidy instability, agencies want to improve program administration practices but lack evidence on effective changes. This study evaluated the impact of administrative changes in Massachusetts designed to make the process of maintaining child care vouchers more family-friendly. This project used mixed methods to study administrative changes that transitioned the location and responsibilities for the reassessment of voucher eligibility for a portion of the caseload from Child Care Resource and Referral (CCR&R) agencies across the state to contracted child care providers. Enacted in 2012, these changes applied to income-eligible families receiving vouchers who were not participating in the TANF or child welfare systems.

Research Questions.

- *Impacts:* What are the impacts of the administrative changes (i.e. changing the location and the agency and staff conducting reassessment) on the stability of subsidy receipt?
- *Variation by Sub-groups:* Is there variation in the impact of the changes by race/ethnicity or service region?
- *Pathways of impact:* Is the decrease in distance traveled to reassessment agencies (i.e reduced travel burden) the primary driver of changes in subsidy stability?
- *Implementation:* What are the key components of the subsidy service delivery system? Is there local variation in reassessment practices and in implementation of the changes across service regions? From the parents' perspective, what are the factors that lead to subsidy exits?

Data/Sample.

- *Children's administrative records:* The study sample included 7,785 income-eligible children served through vouchers that began receiving a voucher in 2012 or 2013. The follow-up period for each child was at least 18 months.
- *Provider licensing data:* All licensed child care providers in Massachusetts were categorized by subsidy type/capacity, geocoded and mapped. Distances to child care providers and CCR&Rs were calculated for each child in the sample.
- *Key informant, provider and parent interviews:* In-person or phone interviews in English or Spanish were conducted with 17 key informants, 19 CCR&R staff, 80 staff at 53 child care centers and child care systems (statewide stratified random sample), and 39 parents who received subsidies for at least 12 months (stratified random sample in four service regions).
- *In-person site visits and caseworker-parent observations:* The team visited five CCR&R locations and observed two to three appointments conducted in English or Spanish at each agency.

Methods. This longitudinal mixed method study integrated the estimation of the impact of changes on subsidy stability using event history modeling with an in-depth qualitative examination of the subsidy service delivery system. To evaluate fully how administrative changes impacted the stability of benefit receipt, the study comprehensively documented how organizations and caseworkers in the subsidy system responded to and incorporated the required changes into their existing service delivery approaches. After estimating the impact of the changes statewide and by region, we used qualitative data to illustrate dimensions of subsidy program

implementation that helped explain the impacts and local variation.

Progress Update. Although child care subsidies are required to be authorized for 12 months, half of the subsidy spells ended at 10 months and varied across service regions from six to 11 months. Younger children had much longer spells compared to older children, which likely reflected breaks during the summer in voucher receipt for school-age children. Hispanic Children had the longest spell (13 months) compared to White (10 months) and Black (11 months). Multivariate regression analysis showed that the probabilities of subsidy exit for Hispanic and Black children were lower than for White children.

We found a positive impact of the administrative changes on subsidy stability at the state level. Children reassessed by their contracted provider had an overall 5% lower predicted probability of subsidy exit immediately after their reassessment month, compared to children reassessed by their CCR&R agency. There was also substantial regional variation: three of the regions (serving two-thirds of the MA caseload) had lower predicted subsidy exits (1-44%) when contracted providers conducted reassessment, whereas four regions had lower predicted probability of exits when CCR&Rs conducted reassessment. The difference in impacts can be explained in part by variation in regional infrastructure (i.e. transportation), organizational capacity, diverse reassessment models and caseworker approaches to solving administrative problems. For example, CCR&Rs in the larger regions, despite having family-friendly reassessment practices (such as outpost locations) were overstretched, which likely made providers a more convenient option for parents. Changing to contracted providers did reduce parents' travel time, but did not impact subsidy exits since many CCR&Rs with high caseloads did not require parents to come into the office for appointments.

Interviews with parents found that, even in the most stable subsidy-receiving group, the reassessment process was administratively burdensome. They noted extensive paperwork, confusing rules, challenges obtaining verification signatures, and making appointments. Subsidy exits were often a result of changes in work and family situations that were exacerbated, in part, by the administrative burden of interacting with agencies to process changes. Importantly, most parents felt that agencies were responsive to their language needs (i.e. bilingual staff

and expressed an array of preferences for reassessment agency and practices.

Implications for policy/practice

This study suggests that reducing family administrative burden at reassessment and encouraging agencies to build a cadre of family friendly practices can have a positive impact on subsidy stability. Changing reassessment agencies from CCR&Rs to contracted providers can be of value particularly in large service regions with high caseloads in the context of lower agency resources. Efforts and resources directed to families during time points when they are most vulnerable to disruptions can be a key factor to increase subsidy stability.

Implications for research

Findings highlight the importance of considering the local dynamics of the child care subsidy system across organizations and caseworkers when designing, implementing, and evaluating changes in service delivery practices and using a mixed methods approach to evaluating such changes.

For more information:

Subsidized Child Care in Massachusetts: Exploring geography, access, and equity (2018). Research Report.

<http://www.diversitydatakids.org/files/Library/Policy/GeoofSubsidizedCareFullReport.pdf>

Multiple and Interacting Sources of Child Care Subsidy Stability: Complexities of Administrative and Family-Level Factors (2018). Presentation.

<https://sswr.confex.com/sswr/2018/webprogram/Paper33141.html>.

A paper that includes the project's final results is currently under review. For links to this paper and to other presentations of project findings, visit:

<http://www.brandeis.edu/facultyguide/person.html?emplid=4827956b7d8790d23a6e5802190ebaf696c27d36>

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