



Striking a Balance: How Child Care Policy can Help Working-Poor Parents Manage Work, Home and Child Care

Today's workforce includes many parents who work "non-traditional hours" and these same parents are in need of high quality child care. This is especially true among the working-poor.

policy brief

Background

Across the nation, research indicates working-poor parents face numerous challenges as they attempt to balance work and family. Particularly vulnerable families, such as those living in rural communities and those with very young children, encounter additional challenges to this tenuous balance when they must secure child care arrangements in order to maintain employment.^{1,2,3} One of the challenges parents face is navigating the child care subsidy system. Established by federal policy and implemented by state regulation, the child care subsidy system is intended to support parental efforts to find and maintain employment by providing income-eligible parents with funds to offset the cost of child care. A related challenge is securing child care arrangements when parents' work schedules are "non-traditional" (e.g., evening, overnight, or weekend shifts).

To examine this issue in Missouri, a survey was designed in 2010 to collect data from low to moderate income families (up to 300% Federal Poverty Level, FPL). The survey was developed using questions designed by the researchers, and also scales developed in previous studies.^{4,5,6} Survey items included: demographic questions; information about the type, cost and conditions of child care; and information about financial assistance. Parents responded to questions about work and caregiver flexibility, transportation, and social support. Consistent with previous research, the findings underscore the need for Missouri to examine state-level child care subsidy regulations with the goal of supporting parental employment and greater work-family balance.^{7,8,9}

Overview of Key Findings:

Based on findings from a survey distributed to 154 parents residing in mid-Missouri, working-poor families encounter numerous challenges when they attempt to balance work and family, secure child care, and navigate the child care subsidy system. Although 75% of the parents were pleased with the support provided by their caseworker and 52% felt their child care subsidy was easy to keep, nearly 40% of parents:

- Encountered child care providers who were reluctant to care for the child because the parents received child care subsidy funds.
- Experienced periods of interrupted or lost child care subsidy payments.

In addition, approximately 25% of parents felt their choices of child care arrangements were limited due to receiving child care subsidy funds and their access to higher quality programs was also limited.

Parents also indicated challenges to balancing work and family responsibilities including:

- An inability to afford the type of child care they preferred.
- Difficulty in applying for and maintaining their child care subsidy.
- A social support system which lacks adults available to provide child care when needed due to work schedule challenges (i.e. evening and overnight, or weekend shifts).

The findings indicate that the opportunity to secure child care subsidy funds improved parental satisfaction with child care arrangements and facilitated a better match between the preferred child care setting and what the parents could afford in the child care market. The findings also indicate that when parents were part of a social support network that provided child care, the parents also felt there was a better match between their preferred type of care and their choice of care. The social support network was also found to promote continuity of child care. Last, parents with greater work-schedule flexibility were more likely to be satisfied with their child care choices.

Policy Recommendations:

1. Expand child care financial assistance for working-poor families.
 - Actively recruit eligible families below 127% FPL.
 - Increase funding with the aim of eliminating the waiting list for eligible families.
 - Identify avenues to broaden the eligibility requirements so all working-poor families in need of child care financial assistance are able to obtain financial support.
2. Create a more user-friendly child care subsidy system.
 - Lengthen recertification periods.
 - Simplify the application process and related paperwork.
 - Examine program policies to ensure they promote the continuity of care for children.
3. Promote work-family balance across social service agencies with consistent policies for working-poor families.
 - Support pilot programs to fund high quality child care during the non-traditional work hours (i.e. evening and night shifts, weekend).
 - Create incentives for employers to offer on-site child care or partner with high quality child care providers to facilitate child care arrangements for employees.
 - Develop assessment tools designed to measure and strengthen parent's social support networks with the aim of identifying potential "back-up" child care arrangements.

Selected References

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