



Rural, Low-Income Mothers' Strategies for Meeting Child Care Needs

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The mothers of the 2.7 million children living in poverty in the rural U.S. have difficult decisions to make when trying to balance earning a living with the care of their children. Although work and child care decisions are difficult for many parents, they are especially difficult for those living in rural poverty, where affordable options are literally few and far between. This research brief provides a summary of the findings of a study of the child care choices of low-income rural families.

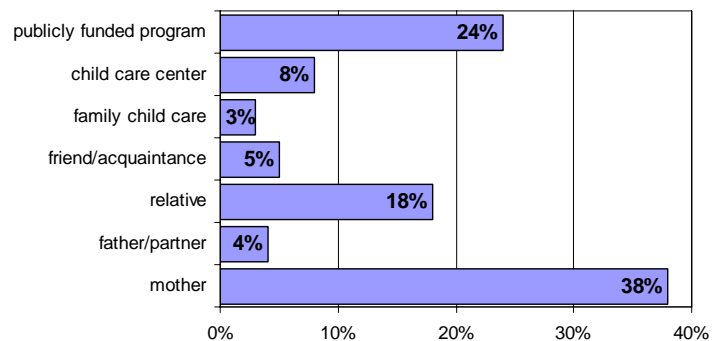
Using data from the Rural Families Speak research project, 371 mothers with limited incomes from rural counties in 14 states, who had at least one preschool-aged child, provided information about the primary child care arrangements that they regularly used for their children. These mothers had a total of 872 children: 248 (28%) infants and toddlers, 190 (22%) preschoolers aged 3-5 years, and 434 (50%) school-agers.

Who Is Caring for Young Children?

Figure 1 shows the choices that mothers made for the primary caregiving arrangement for their children under age 6. The most frequently used arrangement allowed mothers to be the primary caregiver. In this group were mothers who: 1) chose to postpone employment while their children were young; 2) alternated work shifts with a spouse or partner; 3) chose to work nights, weekends, or part-time hours; or 4) worked at home. Publicly funded programs included Head Start, public pre-kindergarten, and kindergarten. Approximately half of children in relative care were being cared for by

their maternal grandmother. In addition to these primary arrangements, two-thirds of the children also had a second child care arrangement where they regularly were cared for.

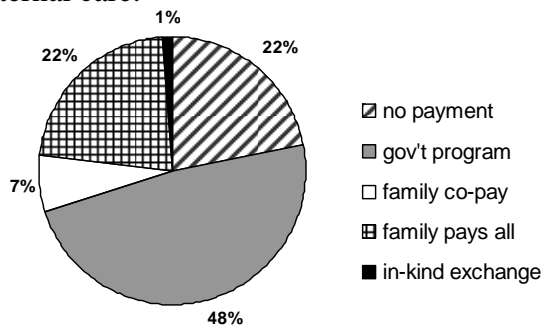
Figure 1. Primary care arrangement of children under age 6.



How are Mothers Paying for Care?

Figure 2 shows patterns of payment for care arrangements for children who were not being cared for primarily by their mothers. Clearly, government programs that provide child care at no cost to low-income mothers are a major source of support. These programs take several forms, the most common of which are: child care subsidy payments that are received either by the parent or by their chosen care provider; Head Start and Early Head Start programs; public preschool and kindergarten programs. The child care subsidy program may also require parents to pay a co-payment, the amount of which depends upon their income. States differ in their program policies.

Figure 2. Payment for care of children under age 6 in non-maternal care.



Qualitative analyses of mothers' comments about government indicate that subsidized programs such as Head Start and public pre-kindergarten are viewed much more positively and used more frequently than are child care subsidy payments. Comments made by mothers indicated the following barriers to satisfactory use of subsidy programs:

- mothers were not aware of subsidy programs or did not know how to apply;
- procedures for enrollment were confusing or were not feasible for mothers employed full-time;
- the low income eligibility cut-off created a gap between eligibility for assistance and a living wage – mothers earned too much to qualify for assistance but not enough to pay for care themselves;
- employment eligibility rules did not allow for a sufficient carry-over time period to allow mothers to change jobs or find new work if they lost or left a job.

Family Support for Child Care Needs

Half of the children in this study were being cared for primarily within their own families and nearly one in five were being care for by a grandmother or relative other than their parent. Qualitative analyses showed that this choice, however, was not only a financial one. The benefit of no- or low-cost care within the family was clearly valued by mothers, but family-based care was a choice based on preference as well as practical benefits. The following quotes show the value of family-based care for these mothers:

- “My family has always been there whenever I needed it.”
- “Whatever time we work, [mom] always watches them.”
- “I don’t really trust [my son] with anybody...I know he’s always safe with [my mom].”
- “I would have to say that [my mom] is my other half when it comes to parenting.”
- “If I didn’t have my mom, I don’t know what I’d do.”

Next Steps

This work suggests several promising avenues of research that focus on regular child caregiving within a family context. More in-depth study is needed on the relationship between child care within a family system and: family dynamics; the well-being of child, mother and caregiver; the quality of care; and children’s cognitive, social and emotional outcomes. Given the large number of children from low-income rural families who are cared for within their families and the risk that poverty already places children in, this area of study would provide valuable information to educators, family support professionals, and policy makers concerns about their well-being.

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For more information:

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