

Executive Summary

The purpose of this review is to summarize recent research on topics related to child care subsidies. It is intended to provide a foundation of empirical knowledge for state administrators, program developers, and policymakers as they choose among and implement subsidy policies. This review reflects current and seminal work completed by researchers in the U.S. and includes published journal articles, dissertations, and reports from studies funded by the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation and other government agencies. The structure and content were selected to reflect topics of interest to child care subsidy state administrators.

The literature on child care subsidies is organized into three sections. The first section provides descriptive information about subsidy use, including a discussion of subsidy usage rates and characteristics of subsidy recipients. The second section reviews literature addressing the associations between subsidy receipt and two intermediate outcomes of interest to the Office of Child Care, parents' choice of high quality care and continuity of care with subsidized arrangements. The third section addresses associations between subsidy receipt and select family and child outcomes, including parental employment, family financial well-being, and measures of children's school readiness and health. Key findings from each of these sections are provided below.

Key Findings

Descriptive Information about Subsidy Use

- Use of child care subsidies among eligible families is low (between 7-34%, depending on the study).¹ Subsidy use is limited by the amount of funding states have to serve eligible families along with other factors. Lack of awareness about subsidies, the burden of application/recertification, and stigma associated with receiving a subsidy have been cited in research studies as possible reasons for low utilization rates.²
- Characteristics of parents, families, and communities have been associated with whether or not eligible families use subsidies. For example, studies have found that low-income single mothers are more likely to receive subsidies than low-income married mothers³, low-income parents with at least a high school degree are more likely to receive a subsidy than families with less than a high school degree⁴, and among families eligible to receive a child care subsidy, those with higher income-to-needs ratios are more likely to receive a subsidy than families that are more financially disadvantaged.⁵ Further research is needed to understand why families with different characteristics vary in subsidy utilization rates.
- Higher income eligibility limits and more generous provider reimbursement rates have been associated with increases in subsidy usage among eligible families.⁶

Subsidies and Parental Choice of High Quality Care

- Based on findings from experimental⁷ and non-experimental studies⁸, child care subsidy receipt has been positively associated with the use of licensed/regulated, and particularly center-based, care.
- A limited number of studies suggest child care providers that serve subsidized children tend to be rated as lower quality than child care providers that do not serve subsidized children.⁹ Likewise, providers that serve a higher proportion of children whose care is subsidized tend to be rated as lower quality than providers that serve a lower proportion of children whose care is subsidized.¹⁰

- Comparisons of the quality of care used by subsidy-eligible children whose care is or is not subsidized have yielded mixed findings. Two studies using data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Survey-Birth Cohort and the Fragile Families and Child Well-being studies found that when Head Start and public pre-kindergarten programs were excluded from comparisons, quality ratings in programs serving subsidized children from low-income families were higher than quality ratings in programs serving children from low-income families that were not subsidized.¹¹ In contrast, one study examined global quality arrangements of young children who were in subsidized and non-subsidized care and found no difference in quality ratings.¹² Finally, one multi-state study found, controlling for household income, maternal education, child age and ethnicity, subsidized care arrangements for infants and preschoolers, but not toddlers, had higher child:adult ratios than non-subsidized arrangements.¹³

Subsidy Continuity

- Median subsidy spells vary by state and study. In six recent studies of state administrative data, the most common median spell lengths are approximately six to seven months.¹⁴
- Recent studies of administrative data in Illinois, Rhode Island, and Wisconsin suggest that families cycle on and off the subsidy program over time.¹⁵
- According to an experimental study in Illinois¹⁶ and analyses of administrative data in six other states¹⁷, the length of subsidy spells is associated with the timing of subsidy redetermination, with shorter redetermination periods being associated with shorter subsidy spells and subsidy spells tending to end at the time of redetermination.
- There has been mixed evidence regarding subsidy policies and the duration of subsidy spells. An experimental study¹⁸ in Washington and two recent studies of administrative data in Oregon and Wisconsin¹⁹ found that more generous policies regarding parental co-payments and provider reimbursement rates are associated with longer subsidy spells. In contrast, one study found that increasing a family's copayment is associated with longer subsidy spells²⁰, and another study found no correlation between copayment level, provider reimbursement rates, and subsidy spell lengths.²¹
- Studies have not found a significant association between income eligibility limits or the administration of subsidies as grants or contracts and subsidy duration.²²

Subsidies and Continuity of Care Arrangements

- Changes in child care arrangements can be predictable (e.g., resulting from school year cycles or child maturation) or unpredictable (e.g., provider no longer being able to care for child).²³ Studies using administrative data have found that the proportion of children in subsidized care that change child care arrangements varies by state. For example, a five state study found that over the course of 18 months, over 70% of children in subsidized care in Oregon, but less than half in Illinois and Texas changed care arrangements.²⁴
- According to two studies, subsidized care is more stable care than unsubsidized care.²⁵

Subsidy Use and Parental Employment

- Low-income parents who receive a child care subsidy have a higher probability of being employed²⁶ and a shorter transition from welfare to work²⁷ than those who do not receive a subsidy. As these associations are derived from correlation-based analyses, causal association can't be assumed.

- Though an experimental study examining subsidized employment did not detect a causal association between subsidy receipt and length of employment, correlation-based studies have found that parents who use child care subsidies maintain work for longer periods of time than parents who do not use subsidies²⁸
- State-based studies have found that additional funding allocated to the subsidy program²⁹ and more generous subsidy policies related to provider rates and income³⁰ are associated with a higher probability of employment for parents using subsidies.

Subsidy Use and Family Financial Well-being

- Though no association was found between subsidy receipt and earnings in an experimental study conducted in Illinois³¹, correlation-based studies have found child care subsidies to be positively associated with families' annual earnings³² and negatively associated with their out-of-pocket child care expenses³³ (though studies have found subsidy recipients to have a relatively high child care cost burden³⁴).

Subsidy Use and Children's Developmental Outcomes

- The association between subsidy use and children's developmental outcomes has been examined in a limited number of non-experimental studies. Thus causal assumptions about these associations should not be made.
- Researchers have examined associations between subsidy receipt and indicators of children's social-emotional, pre-academic, health, and behavioral development by comparing children in subsidized care to those not in subsidized care using non-experimental methods that account for some differences in child, family, and community characteristics. Findings across studies are mixed. One study found no differences in health, cognitive development, and social-emotional development comparing children who were and were not in subsidized care.³⁵ Another study found only one difference in children's academic and social-emotional skills upon kindergarten entry- specifically, children from low-income families in subsidized community-based center care had, on average, lower math scores than children in unsubsidized community-based center care.³⁶ Finally, one study found a positive association between subsidy receipt and children being overweight, and negative associations between subsidy receipt and outcomes related to children's school readiness.³⁷
- Researchers who have compared the outcomes of children in different types of subsidized care have found preschool-aged children in subsidized center-based care to have better pre-academic outcomes than preschool-aged children in subsidized family child care/non-regulated home-based arrangements.³⁸ Both studies that explored this relationship used non-experimental methods, thus the association between type of subsidized care and children's pre-academic skills should not be interpreted as causal.

Key Questions to Consider in Developing, Modifying, and Testing Subsidy Policies, Practices, and Data Systems

The findings highlight a number of issues that administrators could consider in developing, modifying, and testing subsidy policies, administrative practices, and data elements tracked to inform improvements in the child care subsidy program. In assessing current practices, considering new developments in subsidy policies and administrative practices, and refining the information collected in subsidy administrative data, administrators may wish to consider the following issues, opportunities, and questions.

Subsidy Usage

- Using state administrative data, administrators could identify subsidy usage rates among eligible families in their state to answer the following questions: Are there certain populations (e.g., non-English speakers, parents with low education, or very low-income families) that are disproportionately under-using child care subsidies? If so, could changes in policies/practices be implemented to mitigate disparities in subsidy uptake rates (e.g., offering application assistance for eligible clients with low literacy)? *Note: changes in policies/practices could be evaluated by comparing subsidy usage rates before and after changes are implemented.*
- In the absence of additional funds to support serving more eligible families, could policy changes associated with subsidy usage rates (e.g., increases in income eligibility limits and reimbursement rates for providers) be implemented in a state to improve subsidy usage rates overall? If so, could administrative data be used to identify thresholds in state policies associated with differences in take-up rates for all eligible families or certain subgroups? Alternatively, could innovative administrative practices be piloted in certain jurisdictions within the state and evaluated through a comparison of administrative data across these and other jurisdictions?

Quality of Subsidized Care

- If a state has a Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS), are administrators in that state able to use data from the QRIS to compare the quality of care received by subsidized and non-subsidized children in the state? This could be done by comparing providers within a designated locality that do and do not accept subsidies or by comparing providers with a high proportion of subsidized children in care to those with a low proportion. Also, what is the participation rate of subsidized programs in quality improvement initiatives and the state/local QRIS?
- If a state has data on the location and quality of providers, administrators could assess the availability of high quality providers that serve subsidized children, particularly in high poverty density areas. How does the quality of arrangements used by subsidized children (or a high proportion of subsidized children) compare to the quality of arrangements that don't serve subsidized children (or serve few subsidized children)? How does the quality of arrangements used by subsidized children compare to other publicly-funded early care and education programs (e.g., Head Start and pre-K) within designated localities?
- Can administrative data and planned variation in practices within the state be used to identify whether incentives (e.g., tiered reimbursement rates, awards, bonuses) are effective in promoting participation in a QRIS, and if incentives at a certain threshold are more effective than others?

Continuity of Subsidy Receipt and Care in Subsidized Arrangements

- Through analysis of longitudinal administrative data on child care subsidy participation, state administrators can assess the median duration of subsidy spells in the state, how frequently children in subsidized care change child care arrangements, and whether children who leave the subsidy program return to the same provider. These data could be explored for specific subpopulations (e.g., infants and toddlers) or the full population of subsidized children.
- Administrative data can also be used to determine whether families leaving the subsidy program are eligible when they exit, and what proportion of families that leave the subsidy program re-enter the program within 1-2 years?

- Quality ratings from QRIS, in combination with child care attendance data (where available), could be used to determine the quality of care used by families when they leave the subsidy program, and how that compares to the quality of care used when receiving a subsidy?
- If it is feasible to alter policies in order to facilitate subsidy continuity (e.g., implementing a 12-month redetermination period, decreasing parent copays, or increasing provider reimbursement rates), administrators could assess variation in subsidy continuity in response to this policy change using longitudinal child care subsidy data.

Subsidies and Family and Child Outcomes

- Through analysis of subsidy administrative data, administrators can determine what proportion of household income low-income families in the state are spending on subsidized child care.
- Administrators may also be interested in reviewing policies and administrative data to determine 1) how many hours of care are supported by child care subsidies, 2) whether the maximum number of allowable hours adequately covers the hours low-income parents are working, and 3) whether subsidies are supporting children's ability to enroll in part- or full-day early education programs through the provision of wrap-around care.
- By linking subsidy administrative data with school readiness data from kindergarten entry assessments, administrators could identify associations between enrollment in subsidized vs. non-subsidized care and children's skills upon kindergarten entry.

Endnotes

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