Access to Early Care and Education (ECE) for Disadvantaged Families

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Project Description.
The purpose of the present study is to understand the role that state-level child care subsidy policies play in predicting disadvantaged families' access to high-quality early care and education (ECE). The federal Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) has dual goals of supporting parental employment and providing high-quality ECE to children. States set many of their own policies for administering child care subsidies to disadvantaged families, but it is unclear how different subsidy policies (e.g., reimbursement and co-payment rates) are related to access to ECE in different populations—especially ethnic minorities and families with limited English proficiency.

This study has three objectives:
1. Provide descriptive information comparing the ECE access of low-income and higher-income children.
2. Describe ECE centers that serve at least one subsidized child, and compare them to the pool of all ECE centers.
3. Determine how subsidy policy packages are associated with economically-disadvantaged families' access to ECE.

Research Questions.
1. *Do ECE preferences and overall access differ between low-income and high-income families?*
2. *Do ECE preferences and overall access differ by families' racial/ethnic status? Age of child?*
3. *Among **low-income children**, how are packages of CCDF subsidy policies associated with access to care that meets the parents' needs?*
4. *Among **low-income children**, how are packages of CCDF subsidy policies associated with access by racial/ethnic status? Age of child?*
5. *Does ECE quality differ by community poverty density, Hispanic density, or African American density?*

6. *Are ECE centers that serve subsidized children similar in quality to the typical program in the same state?*
7. *Among ECE centers that serve subsidized children, are certain packages of CCDF policies associated with better quality, relative to all centers in the state?*
8. *Among programs that serve subsidized children, how are packages of CCDF subsidy policies associated with quality in communities with (a) higher community poverty density, (b) higher Hispanic density, and (c) higher African-American density?*

Sample. The study uses the *household sample* from the National Survey of Early Care and Education (NSECE), which includes a nationally-representative sample of 4,340 households in which the selected child was younger than five years old. Of the 755 secondary sampling units of the NSECE, 537 were collected from areas in which at least 40% of the households had incomes below 250% of the federal poverty level. Families were diverse: Although 80% spoke English only, 7% of families spoke English and Spanish, and 6% spoke Spanish only. The study also uses the *center-based provider sample* from the NSECE. The study relies on a sub-sample of 5,080 centers that served at least one child under age 6 and did not offer free care to every child. Finally, the study uses the *CCDF Policies Databases* (2009 – 2013) for state-level CCDF policies.

Methods.
Analytic Approach for Objective 1
1. Using state identifiers available in the level-2 restricted-use NSECE, determine whether households are at or below 85% of the state median income (SMI).
2. Conduct descriptive statistics.
Analytic Approach for Objective 2
1. Identify ECE centers that do and do not serve subsidized children.

2. Create a points-based overall quality score, similar to the approach taken by some QRIS.
3. Calculate the average quality score for centers within each state.
4. Conduct descriptive statistics.

Analytic Approach for Objective 3
1. Conduct latent profile analysis to classify states based on their packages of subsidy policies.
2. Conduct logistic regressions to describe associations between different state policies and ECE access (for households) or ECE quality (for centers).
3. Add interaction terms to determine whether the role of subsidy policies varies by race/ethnicity or community characteristics.

Progress Update. *Household analyses.* We created a variable to indicate households' status as economically disadvantaged based on a cut-off of 85% of the SMI. Using several items that were asked of parents regarding their most recent search for child care, we created six dichotomous access variables that indicate whether a child is currently in a type of care that meets the parents' preferences in six areas: nurturing, educational, socializing, affordable, safe, and flexible. To determine how economically-disadvantaged children's access compares to the access of higher-income children in their state, we calculated "relative access" scores that compare each child's score to the average access score across higher-income children in the same state.

ECE center analyses. For ECE centers, we created a points-based overall quality score by assigning different weights to various predictors of quality collected in the NSECE. We also calculated a "relative quality" score that compares the quality of a subsidy-serving center to the average quality of centers in the same state.

Implications for policy/practice
1. *Describing the child care access of economically-disadvantaged families* will help states understand the needs of subsidy-eligible families.
2. *Describing the unique experiences of diverse populations* will help states understand how populations differ in their ECE access, and what

subsidy policy changes may help serve these populations.
3. *Linking subsidy policies to families' subsidy receipt and access to ECE* will help states identify policies that balance the need to provide subsidies to many families, with the need to increase access to high-quality ECE.

Implications for research
1. This study will contribute to a small body of research examining the effect of subsidy policies at a national level. Currently, most research regarding subsidy policies is conducted with data from just one or two states, often excluding subsidy non-recipients due to the use of administrative data of subsidy recipients.
2. This study will contribute to research on access to ECE by *developing a metric of access based on parents' preferences and selected care* and *validating it on a nationally-representative population*.
3. The methodological strategy used to examine subsidy packages—latent profile analysis—will contribute to research examining subsidy policies. Currently, much of the research on subsidy policies capitalizes on data collected from states that change several policies at once, which does not provide a foundation for conducting cross-state comparisons of subsidy policies.

For more information:
- The project is being conducted at Child Trends: www.childtrends.org
- Information about the NSECE: www.research connections.org/childcare/resources/19778

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